

ELLORA'S CAVE EXOTIKA

CARA  
McKENNA

*Shivaree*

## **Shivaree**

*Cara McKenna*

Hot on the heels of a nasty break-up, Natalie's truck dies and strands her deep in Louisiana's sweltering backwoods. A glow beyond the trees and a haunting melody lead her to what she hopes is salvation.

The Shivaree is more than a bar. It's a mysterious oasis where people go to escape into a cold drink and lose themselves against a warm body on the dance floor. Gabriel is its resident musician, gifted with unnerving talent and intoxicating sexual charisma. The only thing standing between Natalie and the perfect rebound is Gabriel's possessive and domineering lover, and Natalie's not afraid of a bully. Certainly not one built like Shane Broussard. She's ready to discover the perfect remedy for heartache—two hot male bodies, one long, sultry, southern night.

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Shivaree

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# *SHIVAREE*

**Cara McKenna**

### *Dedication*

For the fine state of Louisiana, where I enjoyed the boudin far more than the West Nile virus.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Blue Moon: Coors Global Properties, Inc.

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## Chapter One

A couple miles from the junction that would've taken her to Baton Rouge, Natalie's ancient pickup gave three rodeo-quality lurches and coasted to a halt. The engine sputtered to silence, headlights illuminating the neglected gravel road and the dense trees to either side.

"Beautiful," she muttered. She rested her forehead on the wheel and blew out a long breath. What had Chris told her? *You'll never make it without me.* Well, shit. They'd been broken up for less than three days now, and she was already possum meat. She could practically hear his mocking voice, humming the opening to *Dueling Banjos*.

She tried turning the engine over a dozen times with no luck. Slamming her fist on the wheel was equally ineffective, though it felt pretty good. The air conditioner had died with the engine and its magic chill dissipated, replaced by the oppressive August heat.

The barest sliver of a crescent moon peeked from between the treetops. The clock in the dash said it was ten-twenty-six, Miami time, which made it just about nine-thirty here in Nowheresville, Louisiana.

Farther down the road, Natalie could make out a faint glow. A business or a house, she hoped, though she hadn't seen a single building or passed another car in the fifteen bumpy miles since discovering the too-cheap-to-be-true motel she'd been looking for was shuttered and derelict. That's what she got for trusting the decade-old regional guide book she'd paid a quarter for at a yard sale outside New Orleans that afternoon.

"Fuck it."

She pocketed her keys and grabbed her wallet, shoved her purse deep under the passenger seat. She swung the door open and the humidity closed around her throat. Her shoes were practical by her standards, but that wasn't saying much. The pointed

toes and demure one-inch heel were wasted in the darkness, and as soon as she set foot on the ground, gravel found its way under her soles. She had sneakers in her suitcase, inside the cargo box in the bed of the truck, but fumbling around in the dark trying to unlock it seemed an invitation for further frustration. Plus the glow wasn't coming from too far away.

Ignoring the questions bouncing around in her skull—most of which concerned what sorts of snakes might be causing the rustling noises in the undergrowth alongside the road—she headed toward what she hoped was salvation.

“Could just be a streetlight.” She wished she'd picked up a pay-as-you-go cell phone at a convenience store, as she'd been meaning to all day. But she'd just kept driving, kept putting miles between her and Chris, between her and all those mistakes she'd made and the four years she'd wasted on him. She tripped on some unseen bump in the dirt.

“Fucker.”

The glow wasn't a streetlight, though it wasn't as close as she'd hoped either. A quarter mile down the road, she heard the place before she could see it. Music drifted through the woods, haunting and eerie, like a spell. Like the sort of spooky metaphor Natalie wasn't inclined to draw. It carried her closer, making her forget the pebbles grinding into her raw heels.

As the melancholy song ended, a happier one began. The road curved and a building came into view, lighting up the night like a miniature carnival.

It was a three-story white house with a wide front lawn. Hastily parked cars and trucks were strewn over the unkempt grass, and a porch wrapped around the ground floor, lined in mosquito netting and draped with mismatched strings of Christmas lights and electric lanterns. A hand-painted sign hung above the front steps. The Shivaree, it said.

Clearly a bar. In addition to the music wafting out, Natalie heard glasses tinkling, floorboards squeaking, laughter, loud voices calling out to one another. Surely *someone*

in this bustling club would be able to help her — take a look at her truck, or at least give her a lift to the nearest motel.

But her practical troubles dissolved as the screen door slapped shut behind her. Her gaze drifted past the bar, past the couples promenading on the creaky dance floor, past the scattered tables and loitering drinkers to the lone man on the little stage in the corner.

Natalie swallowed.

“Charisma” didn’t go halfway to describing what he had. Tall. Lean, but substantial, utterly magnetic. He looked as if he’d stepped out of some other era, transported by time machine from the 1920s, maybe. Shined black shoes, dark slacks, a crisp dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his biceps. A watch chain dangled from his belt and a gray porkpie hat topped his messy hair. His face was placid. Tan skin, black eyebrows and sideburns. A wide mouth designed for whispering sinister promises.

Natalie looked to his hands and the instrument they were holding, something like a small, asymmetrical guitar, with strange curves to it—something she recognized, but only vaguely. Something from a film set in a different century.

A tap on her shoulder snapped her out of her trance. A couple had arrived behind her, and she mumbled an apology and moved out of the threshold. She kept her eyes off the musician and made a beeline for the bar. She’d planned to enquire about solving her engine troubles, but the thought flew away as the woman behind the taps smiled at her.

Natalie glanced to the bottles lined up above the register. “Blue Moon, please.”

She took her sweating beer back through the crowd, settling herself at a high table. She resisted the temptation to look at the musician again, staring at the couples instead. The fast song came to an end, and the dancers paused to clap and whoop their appreciation.



"Thank you." His voice was low and deep, with a gentle rasp. Natalie's eyes snapped up against her wishes. They found the man smiling into the crowd as his fingers plucked idly at the strings. He eased into another song, its dreamy, dark notes oozing out into the space. Most of the couples stayed on the floor, beginning to slow dance, looking like lovers. Looking like sex, upright to a beat.

Natalie felt the music wash over her, as warm and languid as the air seeping through the screens. The man on stage raised the mic stand up a few inches, and he sang. On some atomic level, Natalie felt the vibrations of his voice pulsating on a wavelength attuned to her own private rhythms. The lyrics were foreign—Spanish—but their meaning was unmistakable. Couples moved as singular bodies, cores pressed tight as they rotated. Hands drifted low, cupping backsides with fond flirtation, holding hips with possession. Parched, Natalie took a deep drink of her beer.

The magnetic man's eyes were closed for much of the song, fingers left to their talented devices, consciousness surrendered to the creation of the music. Natalie was staring at him when his lids finally rose, and she was caught.

For the rest of the song, he held her gaze, his eyes black in the colored glow of the motley lights. She couldn't have looked away if she wanted to. And she *didn't* want to. She wanted this man to sing to her. She wanted him to do everything to her, with an urgency that made her blush and made the damp, hot air feel cold against her fevery skin.

She was so far gone she didn't realize the song had ended until the clapping roused her. The man's eyes released hers. He looked down at his hands as he said, "Thank you," again, the last syllable drawn out into a sigh. He nodded to some unseen person and recorded music came through the speakers, a lazy country ballad. He flicked the microphone off and set his instrument on top of its case by the wall. Hopping off the stage, he snaked through the dancing bodies, heading toward Natalie. She felt her eyes go round.

He was tall, just as she'd thought, perhaps six-one. Slender but masculine, strides graceful and confident.

He'd stopped directly in front of her, a strange, subtle smile curling his lips.

"Hi." She clutched her bottle like a merry-go-round pole to keep from tipping over.

"You dance?"

"Not very –"

He cut off her protest, taking the beer from her hand and setting it on the tabletop. He led her by the shoulder to a small opening in the dance floor.

"I don't dance very well," she finished. It didn't matter. These were lazy steps, a dance with no title or conventions. He led her in slow circles, one hand on her waist and the other clasped around her fingers in the air beside them. She set her free palm on his shoulder, feeling his warmth. From this close, she could smell him and see the tiny beads of sweat along his neck. His eyes were shaded by his hat. It looked vintage, the felt brim worn and the black satin band frayed. She wanted to put her nose to it and be taken back in time to an elegant era when men still danced and wore hats.

"What's your name?" he breathed, and his voice so close to her ear felt like the faintest whisper of a fingertip over her clit.

She cleared her throat. "Natalie. Foster."

"You're from away."

She nodded. "Rochester, New York. And Miami for the last few years."

"You on your way to someplace?"

"Back north," she said. "What's your name?"

"Gabriel."

She let the syllables dissolve in her brain. *Gabriel*.

"What brings you to this place?" he asked.

She laughed. "Chance. My truck broke down, up the road. I came to try and figure out if I can get it jumped, or whatever it needs. But I got distracted." She paused before adding, "By your music."

He grinned, deep and indulgent. "Oh?"

She nodded. "I don't even know what your instrument is. A harpsichord?" she ventured.

He grinned again. "Mandolin."

"Oh right. Sorry."

"But I can play you something on a harpsichord, if you brought one."

She blushed, unseen under the colorful lights. "I was way off, wasn't I?"

"Only by about two hundred pounds."

She blushed deeper. It wasn't her way, but this man made her body's inner workings misfire, sending blood to her cheeks and lips and breasts and lower.

She found her voice a few steps later. "What town am I in?"

"Shiloh. Barely a town. You heading to Baton Rouge tonight?"

She nodded. She watched his throat as he swallowed, the tendons and the bob of his Adam's apple, the dark hair framed in the V of his open collar. She glanced at his arm, bare up past the elbow, tan skin beside white cotton. He had tattoos, dark lines and shapes, just the very edges of the design visible.

All at once, being near this stranger was too much. From a distance, he was a sip of liquor. This near, for this long, he was alcohol poisoning. Natalie felt woozy. His long body felt close, closer than the inch or two separating their chests. The heat coming off him put the southern summer to shame, and sweat trickled down her spine beneath her tank top.

She glanced around the club, over Gabriel's shoulder. It was an odd place. More Christmas lights hung from the ceiling, a canopy of candy-colored stars. Strings of random pendants and window crystals and glass beads were strung there as well, and

all the tall windows were draped with long white curtains. The fabric was strange and spangled, textured with tiny pearls and lace and sequins. The breeze from outside made them dance along with the music.

"You looking at the drapes?" Gabriel asked, amused.

"They're odd."

"Made from weddin' dresses."

Of course.

"Everyone from around here calls this place The Chapel."

She nodded. She kept her eyes trained beyond the intoxicating man in front of her, mustering sobriety. Despite the chaos and noise, it was a peaceful, ethereal, sensual place. She took in the patrons, a mix as colorful as the decor. Everyone looked content, dancing, chatting around tables, seated at the bar.

With one exception. A large man in jeans and a tee shirt leaned against the wall near the front door. He was tall and dangerous-looking, and he was staring straight at Natalie.

"You're distracted," Gabriel murmured. His voice dripped honey down her neck, warm and sweet and sticky.

"It's that man." She pointed with her eyes to where he stood, nursing a whiskey and some invisible grudge. Gabriel craned his neck and smiled.

"That's Shane Broussard."

"Is he your enemy or something? He's giving us the evil eye."

Gabriel laughed, low and seductive. He moved her in lazy circles over the scuffed wood, commanding with his hands, teasing with his breath and smile and the grazing of his chest against hers. Natalie felt lucidity falling away again.

"He's my lover," he murmured.

She tightened in his arms. "Your lover?"

He ran his palms over her bare shoulders, over the goose bumps that had risen there. He nodded.

Natalie glanced to the side, taking in Shane Broussard—well-built frame, nearly shaved head, boxer's arms. He had the air of a soldier, dishonorably discharged.

"He looks...cruel," she whispered.

Gabriel laughed again. He drew his head back to study her anxious face. The edges of his eyes crinkled with mischief and satisfaction. "He's a beast."

Against anybody's better judgment, she ran her fingers over his neck and through his unruly black hair. "Maybe we should stop dancing. I don't want to upset him." She'd inspired more than her fill of masculine displeasure in recent months. Make that years.

Gabriel pulled her closer. "He don' own me."

Natalie sucked in a breath. She could feel him, stiff behind his fly, his erection pressing against her hipbone as their bodies swayed. She hesitated, torn between fear and pleasure. The chill he'd given her moments before gave way to a flush. The humid, hot air enveloped them and its magnolia scent was eclipsed by Gabriel—by the smell of his sweat and skin and by his mere presence. She wanted him. She craved him as palpably as a castaway might crave water. That his possessive lover was watching them with unveiled hatred only deepened the ache. Gabriel moaned softly as her nails raked his neck beneath his collar.

Natalie was used to going after what she wanted and usually getting it...though recent history had taught her she didn't always like her prize once she'd claimed it. Still...

"Does he let you take other lovers?" she whispered, reckless.

"Only women."

"And you do as he says?"

Gabriel ran his lips up her jaw to her ear, warming her with a deep exhalation. "I do."

"Why? What's in it for you?"

"I have my reasons."

With that, he led her with the dance, each step bringing them nearer to where Shane leaned against the wall. Gabriel's body broke from hers as they reached him. Up close, the man was huge, taller than Gabriel by two inches, Natalie guessed. She swallowed, tilting her chin up to meet his cold blue eyes.

"Gabriel," Shane said with a small nod.

"Shane. This is Natalie. She's got some car trouble. Maybe you could help her?"

Natalie's eyes snapped between them.

"Shane's a mechanic," Gabriel said. He ran a hand over her back then curled his fingers around her shoulder, shameless.

"Where's your car?" Shane asked, impossible to read.

"Truck," she corrected. "Maybe a quarter mile down the road. It just sputtered to a halt after a couple of lurches."

His gaze jumped to her feet in their kitten heels. "You walk here in those?"

She nodded.

He breathed out through his nose, the gesture gruff and impatient, saying distastefully, *Women*.

"Why don't you help her, Shane?" Gabriel asked, and Natalie caught the tiniest flick of his tongue against the corner of his mouth. "I'd be so grateful."

"I'll pay you, obviously," Natalie added, hoping she sounded casual. Hoping she sounded as though she wasn't caught between two feral men, their tension as hot and thick as the stifling humidity.

Gabriel's fingers drummed her collarbone. "I have another set coming up." His arm slid from her back and he stepped to Shane. He brought his head close and whispered

something. Natalie caught Shane's eyes close in a wince. They exchanged a long look before Gabriel sauntered off toward the stage.

Natalie stared at her feet, unsure of what else to do. In her periphery, Shane drained his glass and set it on a windowsill.

"Fine. Take me to your truck."

Her head popped up. "Are you sure? I don't want to make any trouble for you."

"Shut up and lead the way." His tone wasn't entirely unkind, but it wasn't far off.

They made their way outside and Shane stopped at his own pickup, grabbing a huge toolbox and a Maglite from the bed.

"Which way?"

"We're walking?" Natalie asked, suddenly able to feel each ripened blister.

He nodded. "I'm half-loaded."

"I could drive. It's not far."

"Nobody drives my truck but me," he said, stony.

"Fair enough."

They walked in silence along the dark road, slapping mosquitoes. Natalie was too nervous to break her stride to kick the gravel from her shoes. In the distance, Shane's flashlight beam winked against chrome.

"That's it."

"Pop the hood for me," he said as they reached the vehicle.

She did and he handed her the light. "Hold this." He prodded and poked. Twice he asked her to try the engine, but it refused to turn over.

"Shit," he said. "All you need's a new plug, but I can't fix this tonight. Tomorrow you better get it towed to the garage and they'll sell you one. Hell, I'll tow it myself."

"Fuck."

He let the hood drop and took the flashlight back. They trudged back up the road, the lights of the club glowing above the trees in the distance, music drifting as though on the warm breeze.

"Thanks for trying," Natalie said.

The beam bobbed and she suspected he'd shrugged.

"I hope we didn't miss the whole set. Gabriel's quite—"

"Don't you talk like you know him," Shane cut in, a warning.

She swallowed but refused to be bullied. "I was just going to say he's talented. Scary-talented."

"You don't know him. I do."

"Fine." She fell silent for a minute. "What is he to you?"

She looked to his face, faintly illuminated, and his eyes met hers, icy cold.

"He's a goddamn curse."



## **Chapter Two**

Shane yanked the screen door open and held it for Natalie, the protocol feeling like a knife against his nuts.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

The music had begun casting its spell from a quarter mile down the road and now they were plunged into it, over their heads. Deep enough to drown.

Across the floor, past the pairs of gyrating bodies, Gabriel stood on the little platform. He was lost in his playing, black eyes locked on some invisible object in the middle distance. Shane took him in, that long, tight body, gifted fingers, goddamn beautiful face, the faint jerking of his hips and arms as he played. So powerful, creating all this. So helpless when Shane had his way, when he punished Gabriel for making him love him the way he did.

Shane glanced to his side, to Natalie. She was lovely. Slender, with tasteful curves, long neck, dark, wavy hair against white skin, a mole on her jaw. Late twenties, he guessed. Her eyes were pale, blue or green or hazel or gray, he couldn't tell, not in the colored lights. A few months ago, he'd have wanted to fuck her himself... But now he just hated her. He hated her for the way she made Gabriel look at her and the way she looked back. Her attention was glued to him now, hypnotized, exactly how Shane must look when he watched too, which made him hate her all the more.

He nudged her with his elbow and she glanced up.

"Get me a beer and a shot of whiskey."

She blinked for a moment, thinking.

"Do the math and you'll find it's a bargain, for a half hour's work."

Her jaw tightened but she nodded. "What kind of beer?"

"Whatever."

She returned, gripping two bottles by their necks in one hand and a rocks glass in the other.

He accepted his drinks with an open scowl.

"What?" She took a pull off her beer.

"I didn't ask for no ice."

"Well, you should have been clearer."

"And this beer tastes like shit. I've had it before."

She rolled her eyes. "You're welcome. You said to bring you 'whatever'."

He took a deep drink. "Tastes like fucking celery."

"It's a witbier. That's wheat you're tasting."

"I know what I'm tasting. And what are you, some kind of expert?"

"No... My ex was a brewer," she murmured then met his stare. "I picked up a few things."

"He leave you for eye-ballin' other people's men?"

"No. I left him. For bringing his work home with him."

Shane stared at her a few seconds longer, thinking of his old man. He nodded solemnly and turned back to the stage.

The dancers paused and the room filled with lazy applause and a few whistles as Gabriel finished his song. He smiled his appreciation and looked up. His dark eyes caught Shane's. He plucked out the opening notes of the song he'd been playing the moment Shane had fallen in love with him—before they'd ever spoken or touched, before they'd come together, tender, and well before the tenderness had faded, replaced with cruelty. Cruelty Gabriel surely attributed to Shane... Falsely attributed. He brought it on himself.

Natalie's voice scattered his thoughts. "Do you dance?"

"No."

"Well, me neither. Can you sway to a beat?"

He looked her over, long and hard. "What're you after, little girl?" As if he didn't know.

"Just dance with me." There was something drunken in her expression. Something that had nothing to do with alcohol.

"Fine." He let her lead him onto the floor, and he put the hand not clutching his beer at her waist as she draped her arms over his shoulders.

They meandered in circles and Shane felt the song wash over him. He heard a tiny spark of feedback as the mic was adjusted then the deep, primal rasp of Gabriel's voice as he began to sing. Gabriel'd learned this song in Havana, where he'd lived in his twenties. Shane had no idea what the words were saying, but they felt like a wet pair of lips sliding down his cock. He moaned against Natalie's forehead as he stiffened.

"He's beautiful," she whispered.

Shane swallowed. "I know."

"Do you love him?"

Shane's feet lost the beat a moment and something thick lodged itself in his throat. "Mind your own business."

"He said you let him go with women."

His pulse spiked. "He does as he pleases, sometimes. You want him?"

"Yes."

"You ever been a heroin addict?"

She pulled her face away, uncertain.

"Me neither," Shane said. "But I bet the withdrawal's got nothin' on him. Think twice before you get in over your head, little girl."

She peered over his shoulder to the stage. "What is he?" she asked. "Cajun?"

"Part," Shane said. "Part Choctaw. His old man's Cuban. He was raised by his bat-shit-crazy grandma in town."

"He's beautiful," she said again.

"He'll ruin you," Shane whispered.

He heard her swallow. "Maybe that's what I want."

"Think it over, when you're sober. You come back tomorrow, maybe I'll let you have him. For a price."

"Fuck you," she said. "You're not his master."

He pulled her body close, not caring if she felt his arousal. "That's exactly what I am."

"What's your *price* then?"

"You let me watch."

Her frame went rigid against him. "No way. You're a fucking control freak."

"I'm tryin' to spare you a lifetime of pain." His own body relaxed, relieved. He watched Gabriel on stage and let that deep voice course through him. He'd hear that baritone soon enough, not singing. Moaning and grunting. Begging. Then commanding. Shane closed his eyes.

"You don't know the first thing about him. Get out of town while you can, little girl."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natalie downed a pint of water as the bar clock's hour hand neared one, trying to counteract the three beers she'd drunk.

After their dance, Shane had retired to his broody corner with a final, mean squint in her direction. She glanced at him every few minutes, amazed. When she'd first sized him up a couple hours ago, she'd seen him as he must appear to the rest of the world – hetero and painfully so. Built like a marine, hard-drinking, handy in a fistfight. Not a jealous wreck. Not a man sick in love over another man.

On stage, Gabriel continued to weave his web. The couples were oblivious, too drunk and infatuated with one another to see, but there was no doubt Natalie and Shane weren't the only ones mesmerized. Scattered around the bar were a half dozen men and women with their attention drawn inescapably to Gabriel, dogs all eyeing the same steak. At a quarter past one, he strummed off a song and murmured a thank-you into the mic. He departed the stage and his haunting music was replaced with canned zydeco to keep the lovers dancing and drinking until after last call.

He strolled to the bar, mandolin case in hand. Natalie watched Shane sidle up to him, carefully keeping their bodies apart by a few inches. He said something private, close to Gabriel's ear. Gabriel craned his head over his shoulder, eyes locking onto Natalie's. Her heart raced into overdrive, pulse pounding hard in her wrists and throat and between her thighs. She'd never wanted a man like this before. She'd wanted her ex, certainly—more than she ever should have—but he'd never made her breath catch quite this way, never made her body prime itself, aching for him.

Gabriel looked back to Shane. He turned a moment later, holding a glass of red wine. He made his way across the dance floor, floating between amorous couples to where Natalie sat at a small table by herself.

"Hello, again." He set his case on the tabletop and took a deep drink, eyes trained on her over the wineglass.

"That was wonderful," she said.

He tapped his glass against hers and smiled, two dimples forming beside his devil's smirk. "Thank you. *Ça viens?* He fix your truck?" He nodded to Shane.

She shook her head. "It needs a part. I'll get it towed tomorrow."

"Where will you sleep tonight?"

"In the cab, I guess. I don't have the cash for a motel *and* a tow."

Gabriel laughed, so obscenely sexy. "No, you won't. You come home with us." He looked to Shane again.

"I don't think your friend likes me much."

"Sometimes, he don' like *me* so much. Or himself. Come with me." He swallowed the last of his wine and straightened his hat. With buzzing nerves, Natalie followed as he led her to where Shane waited by the bar.

"She's coming with us," Gabriel announced.

She caught Shane's nostrils flare with a deep exhalation. "Fine," he said. He set a shot glass on the bar with a loud clack and pulled a set of keys from his pocket.

"We're all drunk," Natalie pointed out.

"That's okay," Gabriel said. "We're not driving."

She grimaced, wiggling her savaged toes in her ruined shoes. "Okay."

Shane slapped the counter and shouted a good-night to the bartender. They headed for the side porch, past passionate couples sequestered in the shadows. Natalie was surprised to be led not out into the darkness but up a set of steps to a balcony.

"You live here?" she asked.

Shane unlocked the door to the second-floor apartment. "Yup. I own this place."

She blinked. "You made me buy you a drink in your own bar?"

"Looks that way." He pushed the door in and for the first time, he smiled at her. She shook her head, a combination of amusement and irritation, and followed Gabriel inside. Shane flipped on a light and locked up behind them.

Natalie glanced around the living room they'd entered, taking in the decor—plain walls painted a deep gold, tall windows, old mahogany furniture. Worn but tasteful. Probably the taste of some former denizen, not this man.

Gabriel set his case on the tiled counter that separated the living room and kitchen, tossed his hat on a coat rack and sank into an old velvet armchair. Like a cat, long and lazy and graceful and predatory. Scheming, to Shane's brutish bulldog temperament.

"You'll be sleeping in here," Shane said. He pointed to the couch.

"Looks ten times more comfy than my passenger seat. Thanks."

"Bathroom's in the back, straight past the kitchen. Don't steal nothin'."

"I hadn't planned on it," she began, but his narrowed eyes posed an addendum. *Don't steal my man.* "I'm just happy to have someplace to sleep."

Shane disappeared for a minute, returning with an armload of blankets and a pillow. He tossed them onto the couch.

"Thanks." She caught Shane flash Gabriel a stern look before leaving the room. Gabriel raised his eyebrows at Shane's retreating back and rose. He stepped slowly to Natalie, eyes on the floor, a smile on his lips.

"And thank *you* for getting him to let me stay," she said.

His head came up. His dark eyes flickered over her face, and she could smell the wine on his breath, the scent of his sweat. She wanted to run her tongue across his throat and taste his salt. In the lamp light she studied the ink on his neck and below his collarbone, as on his arms—sheet music. Notes on staves, scribbled on his skin in blue and black by different hands, as though the composers hadn't had paper handy when inspiration struck. As Gabriel's hands ran up her arms to her neck and cradled her head, Natalie surrendered to the kiss she felt coming. Her palms slid down his chest and stomach to his hips, hungry. Sadly, his lips found her forehead, not her mouth. Gabriel ran his rough thumbs over her cheeks a few times.

"Sleep well." He stepped away, taking his warmth and energy and heading into the dark hall.

"Good night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natalie sat on the couch beside the pile of bedding for twenty minutes or more, rolling a twenty-pound dumbbell between her feet on the throw rug, turning Gabriel's old porkpie hat around and around in her hands. She listened to the muffled music drifting up through the floorboards and stared into space. Eventually the music died, replaced by murmuring voices and flares of laughter then cars starting up, the clinking

of glass as the staff put the club to bed. At the other end of the apartment, doors opened and closed and water was turned on and off in the bathroom. Then nothing but the whirring of insects and chirps of frogs.

She padded through the kitchen to the bathroom, eyes drawn to the left, to the room she assumed was Shane's. Lights were on behind the louvered doors, a warm glow seeping from between the closed wooden slats and the crack above the floor.

She splashed cold water on her face and combed her fingers through her messy hair. Her stomach made an angry noise and she realized she hadn't eaten since lunch. Maybe she could scavenge something from Shane's kitchen and leave him a couple bucks in return. That wouldn't technically be stealing.

But her appetite shifted when she flicked the bathroom light off and stepped back into the hall. Rumbling, masculine voices sounded from Shane's room. She tiptoed to the threshold, trying to peek between the two doors. She couldn't see anything, but she heard them.

"It's humiliating," Shane said.

"She's a perfectly nice woman," Gabriel replied in his languid way. "You just don't like her 'cause she's not intimidated by you."

There was a pause. "You want her?" Shane asked.

"I do."

"You let me watch then."

"Up to her," Gabriel said, sounding light and conversational.

Natalie reached a shaky hand up and tilted the slats of one door open slightly, until she could see them. The room was big, and the two men were maybe six feet from where she stood. Shane's broad back was to Natalie, and he obscured her view of Gabriel, who was sitting on the arm of a couch, facing Shane. She could see his bare feet and one bare arm, more tattoos decorating his biceps. The men were quiet, trapped in some intimate face-off.



Shane finally broke the silence with a groan. "Why do you do this to me?" He sank down, crouching before Gabriel, defeated. Gabriel made a shushing noise and ran his hands over Shane's buzzed hair, consoling. Natalie studied his face and naked torso. He was lean and wild-looking, a long body draped in taut muscles.

"You do this to yourself," Gabriel whispered. He tucked a messy lock behind his ear and sighed.

She heard Shane mumble something that sounded like, "I hate you." He stood up a moment later. Gabriel stood too and tried to wrap his arms around Shane's waist, only to have them knocked away.

"Don't touch me."

Gabriel's reply came low and sweet. "I love touching you. Just like you love touching me."

"I like fuckin' you," Shane spat. "That's all it is."

"I don't believe that any more than you do." This time Gabriel was allowed to wind his arms around Shane's middle for a moment, his fingers raking the cotton of Shane's tee shirt. His hands slid to cup Shane's ass, pulling him close for a second before he was shoved back, rough. They were still for a heartbeat then Shane took control.

Natalie caught her breath. Shane stripped off his shirt, revealing the toned expanse of his back, pale beside his tanned arms. She heard a slap, the sound of Gabriel's hand being swatted away again, she guessed. She eased the slats wider, greedy eyes demanding more.

They grappled for a moment but Gabriel, though muscular, was no match for Shane, who had a couple inches and a couple dozen pounds on him. Shane turned Gabriel around, and Natalie watched his triceps flex and heard the metallic click of a belt being unbuckled.

Gabriel muttered, "No." But it wasn't the voice of a man protesting. It was an invitation. A tease.

Shane yanked Gabriel's pants down his hips and bent him over the arm of the couch. Natalie froze, mesmerized and terrified and aroused beyond belief. And *frustrated*. She wanted to see everything—their faces and chests and stomachs, their eyes at the moment of penetration. She could make out one of Shane's hands on Gabriel's lower back, pinning him. The other fumbled in a pocket a moment then there was the sound of another buckle. He grunted as he pushed his pants down an inch and took his cock out. Gabriel moaned. Natalie heard plastic rustling as Shane got a condom ready. He spat in one palm and his arm muscles twitched as he made one or both of them slick.

"No," Gabriel murmured again, sounding hungry. He gasped as Shane groaned, and Natalie felt desire, wet between her thighs. She wanted to be both of them at once. She wanted to fuck Gabriel and get fucked by Shane. She drank in the sight of them, of Shane's hips pumping, slow at first. His jeans slid halfway down his ass, letting her see the hard muscles working as he pushed deeper. Gabriel moaned, the sound suspended somewhere between rapture and torture.

"You brought this on yourself," Shane muttered, voice shallow. "You made me do this."

"No—"

"Take me. Take my cock. You made me do this, now you take it." Shane's hips pumped harder. He raised a hand and brought it down on Gabriel's ass with a sharp smack.

Gabriel mumbled again between thrusts, something ending in "so big".

"That's right. Say it again."

"You're so big." Gabriel's voice dissolved into primitive grunts and groans.

"That's right. And you're so fucking tight." Another smack. "Tell me who's fuckin' you."

"Shane," he moaned.

Shane's voice deepened. "Good boy. Say it again."

Gabriel grunted the syllable, over and over. Natalie wanted to scream it herself, wanted to reach down and stroke her aching clit and join them in this pleasure and pain. She watched Shane's rhythmic thrusts grow fast and rough until he lost control. His arms trembled, hands grasping frantically at Gabriel's hips. His commands gave way to animal sounds as he lost himself. His ass gave a final, deep thrust and held there as his moan crescendoed then died.

Natalie snapped out of her spell as he withdrew. She could smell him, or both of them, the musk of their sex suffusing the air. She slid the slats nearly closed, ready to flatten herself against the wall should Shane head for the bathroom.

She heard the rasp of breath being reclaimed. Shane stepped back a pace, holding his jeans up with one hand. He snapped the condom off and wandered out of Natalie's line of sight to dispose of it. Gabriel stayed bent over the arm of the couch. She could make out the rise and fall of his ribs and the red mark on his right cheek where Shane had struck him.

Shane returned, buckling his belt. He ran a hand thoughtfully over Gabriel's back and hip.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Gabriel said nothing.

Shane sank to his knees, in profile to Natalie, and buried his head in his palms. Through his fingers he muttered, "I'm so sorry." His shoulders hitched, and she thought he'd actually begun to cry.

Gabriel righted himself. He pulled his pants up while Shane repented at his feet. He took a seat on the couch and brushed a hand over Shane's head.

"You're so hard on me."

Shane nodded his agreement, still rubbing his face.

"Why d'you do this?"

Shane looked up, face damp and contorted. "You make me want you so bad."

Gabriel stroked his fingers across Shane's tear-streaked cheeks. "You can't blame me for this, you know."

He nodded again. "I know. I know. I'm so sorry..."

"You have to make it up to me now."

Another nod.

Gabriel sat back against the cushions. His lap was obscured by the arm of the couch as Shane reached forward to open his fly. Both of their mouths fell open, eyes fixed on Shane's hands. Natalie wished she could see what they could. She wanted to see Gabriel – his black hair and tan skin, every private inch of him.

His eyes shut and he grunted. Shane's powerful shoulders flexed as he pleased him.

"Good," Gabriel murmured. He ran his palms over Shane's ears and neck. "Take me." He guided Shane's head down until Natalie could only see the back of it, cupped in Gabriel's hands.

"Yes." His voice filled the air, that dark baritone lost to moans as he arched his spine and claimed the pleasure due him. "Deeper. Like I took you... Show me how sorry you are."

Natalie tried to swallow but her mouth was dry as cotton. Her body hurt, longing to see this act in all its details and to take part in it. To be Shane, taking orders. To be Gabriel, feeling that power, able to bring a man like Shane to his knees. Her fingers twitched against the slats and Gabriel's head turned, slow. His eyes left his lap to settle on the door, aimed right where her own were spying. Her heart stopped. Gabriel didn't look away for several long seconds. Even when he turned his head back to the matter at hand, his eyes stole glances in her direction. If he knew she was there, it only seemed to excite him more.

"Harder, sweetheart. We both know you love it. You love sucking my dick."

Shane's head and shoulders bobbed, taking every instruction. He moaned, the sound muffled and desperate.

"You look so thirsty," Gabriel whispered, stroking Shane's hair.

Another moan came in reply.

"You want to taste me?"

More grunts, as Shane's entire body communicated his need.

"Suck me good and I'll let you taste me. Suck me. Suck me." It became a mantra, the words growing rougher and harsher by the moment. Gabriel's hands trembled. He stroked his palms over his own chest and neck, over Shane's shoulders. He cried out as he came, hunching forward, fingers digging into Shane's back. He relaxed against the cushions as Shane pulled away. Natalie saw Shane swallow and watched his chest rise and fall with frantic breaths.

"You're so good," Gabriel said. He touched Shane's face fondly then coaxed him to straddle his lap on the couch. They kissed, deep and long, tender lovers suddenly, not master and servant.

Natalie instantly felt like what she was. A voyeur. She slid the slats closed and backed away, one quiet step at a time, until she was back in the living room.

## **Chapter Three**

Natalie woke to the sound of a screen door slapping shut. She sat up, staring around the room for several seconds before she remembered where she was. Weak morning light slipped between the curtains, making the deep yellow walls glow. She rubbed her eyes and checked the clock on Shane's cable box. A few minutes past seven. She wondered which one of them had snuck out so early.

Gabriel answered her question, appearing at the edge of the kitchen. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, though his skin and hair were dry. Natalie took a thorough, greedy look at him, stripped to the hip. Not an ounce of fat. Strong like a dancer and wrapped in those long, lean muscles. A sprinkling of black hair at his chest tapered down to a line at his navel. She drank in the twin crests of muscle at his hip, the start of more dark hair behind where his hand held the towel, low.

He let her stare a good long time before he spoke.

"You sleep okay?"

"Yeah." She chewed on her lip, wondering again if he'd seen her watching him with Shane. "Thanks again."

Gabriel's eyes snapped to his hat, sitting where Natalie had left it on the floor by the couch. She blushed. "Did Shane just leave?"

"Come with me," he said.

She held the blankets tight against her chest. Gabriel's pull was just as strong in the morning light, sober. Scarier, without the dim glow of the bar and the buzz of the beer numbing her judgment.

"Come with you where?" she asked.

He turned and walked down the hallway, letting her see the intricate muscles flexing in his back as he disappeared. She stood, body obeying his order even as her brain hesitated.

She found him in the bathroom with the door open, leaning on his hip against the sink, watching her approach. Waiting. He'd knotted the towel around his waist.

"How long is he gone for?" she asked, shy.

"Long enough."

She stepped close, close enough to smell him. She studied his face in the bathroom light, trying to guess his age. Thirty? Older? Younger? He had a few fine lines around his eyes, deep ones bracketing the corners of his lips, but smooth skin behind a couple days' stubble.

"You still want to be with me?"

She nodded and he grinned.

"Can I brush my teeth?" she asked, and when he laughed, she relaxed.

"Yeah. Whatever you like." He found her a new toothbrush from Shane's cabinet and they stood side by side before the mirror as she brushed and he shaved. When they were done she breathed him in, shaving cream and sweat—the good kind of sweat. He leaned back against the sink, facing her.

"Ready now?" he asked.

"Yeah. Now."

He tilted his head down and kissed her, soft and light, then pulled away, grinning again. He licked his lips, black eyes darting over her face. When his mouth came back, it was hungry. His teeth nipped her bottom lip. He tasted and suckled, teased and coaxed. When his tongue slid between her lips to glide against hers, she felt her core tighten and wetness breaching between her thighs. His hands held her jaw, fingers tangling in her hair. He consumed her and she gave back. He tasted primal, raw and faintly salty. His skin was bitter from the shaving cream, like a sip of cheap gin, and she dragged her

teeth down his throat to his shoulder as her hands stroked his chest. He let out a deep breath above her ear.

"I saw you last night," she whispered. "I saw you with him."

"I know."

She kissed his skin as his fingers raked her scalp.

"It change how you feel?" he asked.

She ran her tongue over his collarbone, surveyed his abdomen with her palms. "I want you more, now." Her fingertips flirted with the soft curls that started below his belly.

"He's possessive."

"I don't care." Her hands roamed his back, tracing his spine and the ridges of muscle flanking it. He stepped away, reached an arm behind the shower curtain and turned on the tap.

"Let me see you," he said.

Nerves returned, tensing Natalie's body as she peeled her tank top over her head and let her jeans slip down her legs. Gabriel's eyes followed each movement. She caught his tongue flirt with the corner of his mouth as she took her bra off. She pushed her plain black briefs down her legs and stepped out of them.

He swallowed. "Beautiful. Come here."

She came close, letting her bare breasts brush his chest, nipples going taut as his hair teased them. He cupped her, squeezing gently, making her ache and arch. His calloused fingers tweaked her, stoking the fire.

"Gabriel."

"I want you so bad," he murmured. The steam that leaked out from behind the curtain made their skin sticky then slick.

Her hands slid between them to free his towel. The length of his erection pressed against her stomach, heavy and thick. Ready. He moaned as she stroked him.



"I thought of you, last night," he whispered.

"When?"

"All night, at the bar. When we danced. And when he sucked me, I imagined it was you."

She held her breath.

"I imagined it was your mouth on me. That I came for you."

"I wanted it to be me," she admitted, barely audible.

"It can be, now. I'll give you anything you want."

She nodded. She tightened her grip, giving his cock long, slow pulls and memorizing every inch of him.

He led her into the hot heaven of the shower. Their wet bodies came together, his hard dick sliding against her soft belly as they kissed, deep.

He moaned against her lips. "Tell me what you want."

She thought a moment. "I want to know what else your fingers can do." The image of them from the night before, so eerily talented, flashed through her mind. She wanted to be mastered like that mandolin.

He turned her around, strong arms circling her waist. Hot water coursed between their bodies. Cooler air leaked in from the room, tensing her nipples. He teased them for a cruel minute before his hands slipped lower, snaking over her wet curls to find her swollen clit.

She groaned as one calloused fingertip stroked her.

"Good..."

He pulled her tight, his cock against her ass. Two fingers strummed her clit as the other hand crept lower still. His chest pressed into her shoulders and he leaned close, the sounds of his excitement right at her ear. He moaned as he ran two fingers up and down the length of her lips.

"Gabriel."

He slipped inside her to the second knuckle. "Fuck. You're so warm." He moved her with his hips, pushed her forward until her arms were braced against the front wall of the shower. She felt him adjust then his cock slid between her legs as his fingers penetrated deeper. They weren't enough. She needed him filling her, deep and thick.

"I want you," she gasped.

"You'll get me. Just not yet." He thrust his length slowly between the sensitive skin of her inner thighs and his fingers dove and stroked, explored and teased. His moans were deep and chilling, so close behind her. Her pleasure and need mounted until her knees shook.

Just as she thought he was going to give her release, his fingers withdrew. He spun her around again and dropped to his knees. He coaxed one of her feet onto the rim of the tub, and his mouth claimed her. His tongue flicked her clit, reigniting the fire. She raked her nails through his wet hair, studied the angles of his brows and nose, the black spikes of his eyelashes as the water streamed over his face. His hands held her thighs and he feasted, a man in thrall.

"Gabriel..."

He moaned against her, the touch of his tongue intensifying. She watched his shoulders flex, fantasizing about how they'd look if she could somehow watch from behind as he fucked her. How they'd look to Shane when he took this man, rough and greedy.

Her orgasm grew, nearly peaked, then dialed back as his tongue slowed. He brought her close, three, four, five times, until she was clawing at his arms, desperate. She heard the tiniest laugh escape him as his tongue finally gave her the pressure she needed and kept it coming as she rode out the spasms. Her leg twitched as she relaxed, and she nearly fell out of the shower. Gabriel held her steady, smiling up at her with wicked eyes.

"Beautiful."

She giggled, a silly sound she hadn't made in months. She combed her fingers through his dripping hair and he gave her clit a last flick with his tongue, a little zap to her over-sensitized nerves.

"Come." He stood and shut off the taps, dripped water all over the floor as he found her a clean towel. They dried off and she studied him again in the yellow glow of the cheap vanity lights. The climax had left her feeling high, her vision crisp and acute. Gabriel looked stark and dramatic, like an actor in a stylized piece of film.

She let him lead her to Shane's room, to his bed. He took her towel, tousling her hair one last time and grinning at her. The towel dropped and his mouth claimed hers again. She heard him sucking harsh breaths in through his nose, desperate sounds. Her hands found his cock, stroking until he lost the coordination to kiss and groaned against her lips.

She stepped back a couple paces and found the edge of the bed with her calf. She sat down, wriggled over Shane's rumpled comforter and lay her wet hair across his pillow with its man-marinated smell. This bed where two strong men fucked the living daylights out of each other... The thought made her feel obscenely feminine.

Gabriel crawled over the covers to her, covering her naked body with his. His weight felt sinful as he pushed her into Shane's mattress.

"How do you want it?" he asked, forehead pressed to hers, eyes glittering.

"Whatever you like."

He leaned over to grab a condom from the bedside table, and she studied his cock again as he unwrapped it. Fairly long, nice and thick. His curls were still wet from the shower.

"Let me." She took the rubber and unrolled it, measuring him as she went.

His hips pushed her thighs wide and he reached down to angle himself. He stroked his head up and down her lips, eyes locked between them. She cupped his ass and pulled him close, until she felt every inch sink deep inside her swollen pussy, until their hipbones touched.

"Gabriel."

He held there, making her feel it—feel him pulsing, needy beneath the affected veneer of patience and self-control.

"Fuck me," she said.

He drew back slow then plunged in again, balls slapping her. He laughed at her gasp. The thrusts came fast and rough, punctuated by his grunts and the sound of his thighs hitting hers.

"Yes." His eyes shut, face reverent. His forearms locked tight against her ribs. She watched his tight, tattooed chest and shoulders, flexing with each push and shining with sweat. He fucked like an animal, greedy and primal.

"Well, lookie here."

Natalie jumped at the sound of Shane's voice. Gabriel's hips slowed but didn't stop. They both looked to where Shane stood by the couch, arms crossed over his chest.

"Big fuckin' surprise," he said, staring them both down. "Can't believe my shock."

Natalie wasn't sure what to do, but she didn't have much choice as long as Gabriel had her pinned. He caught her eyes for a long moment then lowered his mouth to hers. His hips sped up as the kiss deepened, the display clearly designed to excite or enrage Shane. He released her mouth and leaned back on his haunches, hands holding her knees, letting all three of them see his cock surging out of her, fast and rough.

Natalie heard Shane make a noise, a gruff sigh, accompanied by a thump. She turned to see his other boot hit the floor. He glared at them with the air of a man weary from a long day at work and stripped off his socks. "I let you stay here as a guest in my house, little girl. This is how you repay me?"

She glanced at Gabriel, still fucking her, unperturbed. She glanced back at Shane, looming about ten feet tall, looking like heaven and hell and purgatory all rolled into one pissed-off, muscular package. She tugged at Gabriel's hips and he lowered back down, arms locked at her sides.

"I want *him* too," she whispered, pointing to Shane with her eyes. "I want him to join us." She caught Shane's cold stare and ran her hands down Gabriel's back, cupping his ass, kneading the hard muscle there. She spread his cheeks and stroked her fingertips over his asshole.

Gabriel sucked in a breath. "He's territorial," he warned.

"That's what I'm counting on." She circled him with the pads of her fingers until he moaned.

"Fuck me," he whispered. He reached over and grabbed the lube bottle off the table, snapping it open. He smeared a measure across her fingers, hips never missing a beat. "Fuck me."

Her slick fingers teased him until he was panting. She could sense Shane in her periphery, his anger tangible as a twenty-degree temperature spike.

"Come on. Please." Gabriel's voice was strained. "Please."

She slid the tip of one finger inside him and he rewarded her with a gasp and a buck of his hips.

"Yes. More." His cock hammered, excitement mounting.

She pushed into him deeper, another half inch, eliciting a moan that reverberated in her bones and made her feel high.

"More. Fuck me. Fuck me like he does." He was playing her game, baiting Shane, and across the room she could see the other man's fisted hands shaking at his sides.

Without warning, she plunged another finger inside Gabriel, fast and deep. His cry was bestial, surprise and pleasure wrapped in a dark groan that raised the tiny hairs all along her arms. He continued to pump her, but his body grew distracted, losing its grace.

"You're so tight," she murmured, the comment designed for Shane.

"Deeper."

"That's as far as I can take you," she said, her fingers withdrawing then sinking again to the third knuckle.

"I need more."

"You need *him*," she said. She flashed her eyes at Shane. "We both do."

The man's face was steely. He approached the edge of the bed in slow strides, stripping off his shirt as he neared. Natalie took in the cut shape of his chest and stomach and arms, the sheer size of him. He opened his belt and fly and dropped his jeans, revealing gray boxer briefs tented by a huge erection. Gabriel turned to look.

Natalie kept fucking him with her fingers. "Is that what you want?" she asked Gabriel.

Shane stroked himself through the cotton.

"Yes," Gabriel groaned.

"Show us, Shane," she said.

His lids looked heavy as he fondled himself. His erection was long, curving up to the right, filling his shorts to the waistband. He pushed the fabric down, exposing the biggest, thickest cock Natalie had ever seen in person. She and Gabriel moaned in unison.

"Come on, Shane," she whispered. She slid her fingers from Gabriel and held his ass, squeezing him, raking his skin as an invitation. "He needs you."

Shane stood, stoical, jerking himself. Natalie wanted to see the length of his tall, strong body working, and feel his weight behind Shane's. She wanted to see his face as he gave himself over to his darkest desires and succumbed to the pleasure. She pulled Gabriel's cheeks apart and stroked her wet fingers over his asshole.

"I'm not enough, Shane."

He held her eyes for a long moment then stepped out of his jeans. The mattress bucked as he joined them. He forced both their pairs of legs wide as he knelt behind

Gabriel, pointed to the table and snapped his fingers. Gabriel fumbled for a string of condoms and the lube.

As Shane got equipped and guided himself close, Natalie watched Gabriel's face. He looked fearful and excited, flushed with dark anticipation. He choked out a gasp and she knew Shane was starting to penetrate. She rubbed her hands over his face, transfixed by all the intimate evidence of his pain and pleasure. She kissed him, soft, then deeper.

He moaned against her mouth as she felt Shane pushing into both of them.

"Better?" she whispered, loud enough for Shane to hear.

Gabriel nodded, frantic, the cock-sure master of seduction reduced to a desperate, panting mess. He slid his arms beneath her back and buried his face against her throat.

She found herself looking right into Shane's eyes.

"Fuckin' my man in my bed," he said over Gabriel's shoulder. "You got some goddamn nerve, girl."

Gabriel moaned as Shane took him deeper. The thrusts forced Gabriel's cock hard inside Natalie's pussy, making her feel as if she were being taken by both of them. She watched Shane's body, upright and commanding. She could see the nest of brown hair and the base of his thick cock as his length disappeared and then withdrew from the cleft of Gabriel's ass in steady strokes.

"I wanted *you* too," she said.

"Selfish," he spat, and there was a gleam of cruel triumph in his eyes.

True, she thought. She feasted on Shane's hard body as it drove into Gabriel, drove him deeper inside her cunt with each pump of his hips. A moan escaped as she imagined those thighs slapping against her own, giving her that huge cock, anger underscoring each thrust.

She looked to his face. There was pleasure there and something more. Something vulnerable and helpless behind the animal desire. The emotion was so raw Natalie had

to look away. She watched Shane's cock hammering Gabriel's asshole, owning it. She reached down to grasp the cheeks, kneading the firm flesh to excite Shane, aching to know how it must feel to dominate such a beautiful, magnetic man.

"He loves it, Shane. He loves the way you fuck him."

Gabriel moaned against her throat, confirming her words. He pushed up onto his elbows, craning his neck to look at Shane. In profile, his face and ear were flushed pink. Natalie felt the fever in her own skin — that hot, impatient need.

She whispered, "He's so big."

Gabriel groaned, still watching.

"Big and thick," she said. "Is he hard?"

Shane answered for him. "Like fuckin' steel." His hands were clamped on Gabriel's hips, arms tensed, roped with muscle. He rode him harder, and Natalie felt the impact echoed through Gabriel's body.

She caught Shane's wild eyes. "Let's make him come, Shane. Let's make him helpless, like he makes us."

Shane pounded Gabriel a few beats longer, then pulled out, stripping the condom and tossing it aside. Natalie pushed Gabriel away enough to slide the rubber from his throbbing cock. She drew him back, drew his length against her swollen lips, hearing him gasp, feeling him shudder at the contact. She coaxed a few thrusts, soaking him in her wetness.

"I want him to taste me when he sucks you," she whispered.

Shane was still kneeling, chest rising and falling fast, eyelids heavy, sweat gleaming on his skin. Natalie slid from under Gabriel and urged him onto his back.

"Let's make him beg," she said to Shane.

Shane went to his jeans and unfurled the belt. Natalie straddled Gabriel's stomach and grabbed his wrists, sliding them through the tubing of the metal headboard so



Shane could bind them. He joined them again on the bed. Natalie licked her lips, studying Shane's erection with its weeping slit, the definition of *ready*.

"May I?" she asked, making her meaning plain with her eyes. Shane nodded and she touched his dick, weighing it in her hand, marveling at his size. Her fingertips touched the pre-come at his tip, teasing his head, then making the shaft slick. Making Gabriel watch.

"You're so strong." Her eyes roamed Shane's powerful body. "I loved watching you fuck him last night too."

"You saw us?"

She nodded, blushing but unafraid. "Through the slats in your door. I'm sorry."

"No you ain't."

She gave him a sheepish grin. "Well, no. Maybe not."

Shane's lips parted as she stroked him in long, slow, tight pulls. "Nobody's ever seen me with him before."

She met his eyes. "Thanks for letting me be the one."

For a few seconds, it was just the two of them, her cool palm wrapped around his hot, pounding cock. There was an odd tenderness in the touch and to Shane's features as he watched.

"Can I watch you suck him?" she asked.

His gaze slid to Gabriel's supine body and the erection hovering above his tight stomach. Natalie saw hunger in his eyes.

"Go on. He needs you." She released Shane's cock and he sank down between Gabriel's spread legs.

She tried to identify the emotions passing over Shane's face—fear, excitement, longing, shame. He wrapped his big hand around Gabriel's shaft and put his lips to his head. His eyes closed as he took the first inch. Natalie held her breath, transfixed, and

her pussy tightened. Gabriel moaned as Shane's tongue gave him some unseen pleasure. Shane moaned too, a thirsty, greedy sound.

She reached out to touch Shane's short hair, and he let her. She raked his scalp, the way Gabriel had when she'd watched them in secret. Another inch disappeared in Shane's mouth and the tendons in his arm tensed as he stroked Gabriel.

"Don't let him come yet," she said, running her hand over his strong shoulders. "Make him wait."

He pulled his head back and she watched him lap at Gabriel's head, slick tongue torturing. She stole a glance at Gabriel's face; she never would have imagined he could look this powerless.

"Can I have a turn?" she asked Shane.

He moved to Gabriel's side but kept his fist pumping, slow and mean. Natalie took his place, breathing in Gabriel's scent as she lowered her lips. Shane slid his hand lower to cup Gabriel's balls, letting her take his shaft in her hand. She rubbed the smooth skin of his head across her lips then flicked her tongue to taste him. She made a happy noise and tightened her fist.

They pleased him together. Each time Gabriel seemed near to coming, they traded who sucked him, cutting off the climax. Soon he was whimpering, arms tugging against the headboard, all his muscles strained and desperate. Shane lowered down to his arms and nudged Natalie out of the way.

"Milk him," he said, and ran his tongue over Gabriel's swollen head.

She sat up, moving to Gabriel's side. She gave his cock long strokes as Shane suckled him, his moans filling her ears. Shane's voice joined in the hungry chorus.

"C'mon, boy. Give it to me."

Natalie jerked Gabriel harder, dying for his climax. Dying to see Shane take it, to watch him sacrifice his persona for the sake of pleasure, right here next to her.

Gabriel's voice dissolved into grunts, their rhythm attuned to Natalie's touch.

"Here he comes," Shane said between licks. "Come on. Come on." His hand grasped Natalie's as Gabriel came, holding it tight and slowing the pulls. She saw Gabriel's come lash Shane's lips and tongue before he closed his mouth over him, sucking. Both men's eyes shut, and Gabriel's moans faded to silence. Natalie felt her heart slamming against her ribs.

Shane let her hand go, rolling onto his back on the other side of Gabriel's panting body. He began to jerk himself. "Let him loose," he said.

She rose on wobbly knees and unbuckled the belt. Gabriel slid his hands free and curled his body against Shane's. His hand took over. Shane turned onto his side and their faces met.

Natalie knelt, watching, knowing it was the single most erotic experience of her life. Shane cradled Gabriel's face as they kissed. She saw the flush deepen in his cheeks, saw his fingers twitch as Gabriel brought him closer and closer, until Shane buried his fingers in Gabriel's hair and held his head, losing himself. He moaned – a harsh, bestial noise as his come spurted on Gabriel's stomach in long spasms.

Natalie shuddered, rocked to her marrow by the intimacy humming in the air, tangible as the smells and the heat and the sound of them reclaiming their breath. She looked down at their panting bodies, no clue what to do with herself. Gabriel preempted her panic, reaching out to touch her arm. He coaxed her to lie behind him, to press herself into his back and join them in the reverie.

## Chapter Four

Bright noontime sun was streaming through the tall windows when Natalie's eyes opened. She was alone in the bed, though its owner was nearby, putting clothes away in his bureau.

She sat up, wrapping the comforter around her bare chest and searching the room. "Where did he go?"

Shane kept his eyes on the drawer, expression tough to read. "He's a stray. Wanders in and out as it suits him. Always comes back."

She bit her lip. "Is he playing again tonight?"

"It's Latin dance night."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Shane finally met her eyes. "Come and find out." There was a threat or a challenge in his voice, something sinister she couldn't pinpoint.

"I will."

"Your hair's a damn mess."

She ran her fingers through the tangles.

"Don't you need to get back north?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Nobody at home's expecting me. I'm going back with my tail between my legs. Can't say I'm in a hurry."

He pushed the drawer closed. "You hurt your family or something?"

"No. Well, maybe."

"What'd you do?" he asked.

"I ignored all their warnings and ran off with my no-good boyfriend, all the way to Florida."

He nodded. "I got a hitch ready to tow your truck. I'll bring it to my shop this afternoon, if you're good for the money."

"You couldn't just bring the plug back?" she asked.

"I wanna charge you for the tow."

Natalie sighed and flopped back on the bed. "Neanderthal."

"Homewrecker," he countered, but she heard teasing in his voice, one of the warmer tones he'd offered her since they'd met. She suspected what she'd seen and what they'd shared had changed their dynamic. How could it not?

"Do you need me to get out of here soon?" she asked.

Shane turned to look right at her, and she saw him as if it were the first time. He was handsome—and not just big and built and hot, some caricature. A good-looking man stood in front of her, with an honest face and sad eyes the color of slate.

"You can stick around," he finally said. "For the day. Just do your own dishes and don't go snooping through my shit."

"Can I watch your TV?"

He nodded. "But don't make no long-distance calls or nothin'. I'll be back around six."

"When do you think Gabriel will be back?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Darlin', if I had the first clue how to predict that, I might actually be able to sleep at night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natalie spent most of the day lounging and flipping channels. And poking through Shane's drawers trying to figure out who he was.

Most of the junk cluttering up the closets was clearly leftover from the previous inhabitants—ancient vacuum cleaners and mothball-stinking, out-of-date clothes, ironing boards and musty furs. His bedroom was the only interesting room in the

apartment, but it didn't hold many secrets. No porn – none she could find, anyhow – no letters, no sex toys, no X-rated snapshots of old lovers. Dull dull dull. If she hadn't watched with her own eyes as he'd fucked the holy hell out of the sexiest man she'd ever seen, Shane Broussard wouldn't have struck her as all that remarkable.

She went downstairs around five and sat at the bar. It was quiet, just her and a handful of early drinkers. She nursed a beer, eyes and attention on the door, waiting for Gabriel.

Shane arrived just after six, lugging two cases of beer. A deliveryman was on his heels, wheeling a dolly stacked with more of the same. They disappeared into a back room and then emerged as Shane was signing an electronic pad. He noticed Natalie and headed to the bar. He smelled like a man – motor oil and leather.

"You stay out of my stuff?" he asked, then addressed the barman. "Usual, Zach. Thanks."

"I looked through all your closets and drawers and under your bed. Total waste of time." She smiled at him with her eyes as she took a deep pull off her bottle.

His mouth twitched, trying not to smirk, she suspected. "'Bout as much as I expected from you."

"When does the Latin dance portion of the evening get under way?"

He glanced at the clock. "Starts in an hour, but like everything in this place, it doesn't come to a boil until ten or eleven."

"Will he be here?"

He nodded. "Yeah. And you'll get exactly what you deserve."

"What does that mean?"

"Stick around and find out, Miss Natalie."

She rolled her eyes at his cocky tone.

Shane reached over the bar and conjured a portable phone from some unseen shelf. He punched in a number and swiveled his eyes to Natalie's. "You want a burger or something?"

"Sure."

Shane ordered delivery for them and the two bartenders on duty and tucked the phone back behind the counter.

"I'm out of cash," she said.

"I'll add it to your tab at the shop."

"Thanks for taking my truck in."

Shane grinned. "Hold those thanks 'til you've seen the bill."

"You know," she said, "I don't think you're half as big a jerk as you want me to think."

"Must be losing my touch."

The food arrived awhile later and Shane divvied up the orders. "Grab us a table," he said to her.

They sat and ate and Shane people-watched, and Natalie pretended to people-watch, but mainly just inventoried the folks coming through the door, filing them all under "Not Gabriel". A stout man carrying a trombone case arrived just before seven. He waved to Shane.

"Evenin', Luke. You're first." He nodded to the stage, where Luke went to fiddle with the speaker cords and mixer. More musicians trickled in and someone set up a drum kit. The sounds of tuning instruments peppered the air.

When Gabriel finally sauntered through the door, Natalie's pulse rocketed as if she'd been shot full of adrenaline. He had his mandolin in one hand, another gigantic case in the other. He was talking with another man as he entered, and he flashed Shane and Natalie his dark eyes as he passed the table. Her heart leapt into her throat.

"Is Latin dance night popular?" she asked Shane, partly to make sure she could still talk.

"Sure. As popular as any other night around here."

"It certainly was bustling yesterday," she offered.

"Latin dance, blues, jazz, Gabriel on his lonesome. It all just means foreplay here." He waved his hand around the bar, the sultry space lit like Christmas. "People don't care what they're listening to or how they're dancin'. They just care who they're with. Or who they might get with, if they play their cards right."

Natalie nodded. "Folks were getting pretty amorous on the floor last night."

"You ain't seen it at last call. This place does something to people."

She nodded again. Her eyes drifted to the musicians, to Gabriel tuning an upright bass, face shaded by his hat.

"What else does he play?" she asked Shane.

"I ain't seen an instrument he can't play."

"Wow."

He shrugged. "Just what he does. I never seen him read a book or drive a car or use a phone, but he can play. But it's not his playing you should be worried about tonight."

She sighed. "Thanks for the warning, Dr. Ominous. I've seen some shocking things in the last twenty-four hours, though, and lived to tell. Is this place about to go all *Eyes Wide Shut* on us?"

"Nah. And anyhow, the show's gonna be right here." He tapped the table then pointed at her face.

The lights dimmed everywhere but the dance floor and stage. The drummer counted them off and the band launched into a raucous number.

The half-dozen couples already on the premises hit the floor immediately. The women, young and old alike, wore heels, and knew what they were doing.

Natalie half-shouted over the music to Shane. "Is this salsa?"



He nodded. She watched the dancers, enjoying what these people could do. She tapped her feet, wishing she'd taken classes so she could have a bit of their charisma. As the bass player, Gabriel didn't have the most dynamic role, but it was hard to imagine anyone watching the band and seeing anyone else. Natalie studied his fingers flashing deftly along the length of the person-sized instrument, wishing she could magically inhabit it and feel his masterful calluses coaxing those deep notes out of her.

They played a couple more songs like the first one, then the band reassembled, swapping out some strings for more drums and a flute and a tambourine, and other things Natalie couldn't identify. Gabriel leaned the bass against a wall and took the hand of a young woman in a swishy skirt, coaxing her out of her seat. He led them to the middle of the floor as a new song began.

"Do they know—" Natalie never finished her question. Gabriel and the woman began to dance, and Natalie lost her mind. She'd heard people say that a man is just an accessory in ballroom dancing, just there to make the woman look good, but she didn't take her eyes off him. The only times she noticed his partner were when their bodies came together so closely and so smoothly and so *erotically* that Natalie had to grit her teeth to keep a territorial shriek from erupting from her lungs. He may as well have been fucking the girl for all Natalie's body cared. And not just the one girl. He switched partners between songs, working his way through the room, sampling from one big tasting menu.

It was going to be a long-ass night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane returned from the bar around nine with a third round of beers. He caught the predictable sourness pursing Natalie's lips, and that all-too-familiar heat burning in her eyes. He got her attention and jerked his head toward the back of the room, away from the stage and the dance floor. She followed him to the sunken lounge area on the screened-in porch. The couches and chairs were all full so they stood by a tall table, lit

pink by a neon sign mounted on the wall from some defunct drive-thru wedding chapel.

Shane handed her a bottle. "Now you know how I felt yesterday when he danced with you."

She met his eyes. "How does he do this? Make us feel this way?"

He shrugged and took a pull off his beer. "Beats the hell out of me. It's just him. I hope he up and disappears one day and doesn't come back. Just lets me go... Or he grows old and sick and loses whatever it is that makes me want him this way."

She nodded, solemn, then laughed a small, private laugh.

"What?"

She smiled down at his hand, wrapped around his bottle. "I was so surprised when I found out you two were...lovers. I never would have guessed you were —"

"I'm not," he cut in, hackles rising sharply.

She blinked. "No?"

He shook his head. "It's him. I like women. Always did, until he showed up."

"Oh." She nibbled her lip.

He felt frustration flash hot through his body. "I ain't lyin', you know."

"I believe you." She took a deep drink. "I mean, I never slept with a man whose last name I didn't know before him. Or had a threesome. Or slept with somebody else's lover," she added, and looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry."

"He makes people do things," Shane offered. He was tempted to clap her on the shoulder, a truce, but wrapped the hand tighter around the bottle instead. "If you'd come here six months ago, before he did, I'd have been all over you."

She held his gaze and took another drink. "Yeah?"

He nodded. "Sometimes I think he's ruined me."

"You're awfully cruel to him too, you know."

He cocked a brow at her. "That's what he likes. With men."

Her eyes drifted through the open French windows to where Gabriel commanded some hapless woman out on the hardwood. "He seems so in control."

"He is. He makes himself into whatever people want him to be. You wanted to get seduced last night, so he seduced you. I want to use him and treat him like shit, so I don't have to admit how helpless he makes me. And he lets me."

Natalie's eyes widened, clearly surprised he'd come out and said this.

"Then I do," he went on. "And afterward I remember how we used to be, and then *I* feel like shit." Where had those early days gone? They'd faded, in a blur of drunken memory. Those first cautious nights when Gabriel had been the seducer, when empty bottles of wine had multiplied on the living room floor, enough to numb Shane into forgetting how much the feelings he was fighting disgusted him. Enough to let the lust overpower the fear and revulsion, enough to make them stumble to Shane's bed, tearing at each other's clothes, jerking one another until they were blind with need.

Over the weeks, they'd shifted. The trust had dissolved as Shane noticed how openly Gabriel's eyes wandered and tenderness had given way to aggression and jealousy. Gabriel seemed only too happy with the change. The only scraps of affection they found these days were in the fleeting moments just after the peak of their cycle of brutality and apology and penance. And this morning they'd been that way, a show for Natalie.

Her voice broke through Shane's thoughtful haze. "You hate him because you can't stand the thought that you're attracted to a man?"

He considered it for a moment. "No."

She raised her eyebrows.

"No. I hate him because he makes me love him, and he doesn't love me back. The sex... I've come to terms with that. It doesn't threaten me. Not the way it did at first."

Natalie looked him over. "You're one of the manliest men I've ever seen," she said. "I bet you can open beer bottles with your teeth. It'd take more than bedding one man to diminish that."

Shane laughed, humorless. "Look at him."

She turned to where he was leading a woman across the floor, in complete and utter control. Tall, built, surely whispering in that deep voice, promising dominance with those deadly hips.

"He's beautiful," she murmured.

"Fuck beautiful," Shane said, and she turned to face him. "He's a man. A strong one, who can hold his own in a fight and knows how to fuck a woman senseless."

"Yeah," she murmured.

"You wanna know somethin' strange?"

She took a drink and nodded. "Sure."

"I've never felt bigger or stronger or more powerful than the first time I fucked that man's brains out." He pointed with his beer. "The first time I turned that man right there into a pleadin', helpless mess...no woman's ever made me feel so fuckin' big. Not even close." He drained the bottle and slammed it on the table between them, making Natalie jump.

"It's a goddamn addictive feeling," he said.

"I'll bet."

Shane wiped the back of his hand across his lips. "I can't stop unless he leaves me. Cold turkey or nothin'—just years more of this." Moments of bliss spaced out by hours or days of torture. "All that waiting and jealousy and feelin' like shit after I get what he makes me want."

"How were you before him?"

Shane sighed, remembering those days of free will like scenes from a movie—scraps of a life that didn't belong to him. "It was easy."

"Were you with a lot of women?"

"I suppose. A few times a week I'd bring someone up to bed with me after the bar closed. The chase or the hunt or whatever. The take-down. All that shit."

"Love 'em and leave 'em?"

He shrugged. "I made them breakfast."

Natalie laughed. He studied her face, her mouth in that wide smile, showing off her perfect white teeth. It made him want something he hadn't in a long while.

"Come upstairs with me," he said.

"Why?" Her eyes darted to Gabriel for a split second before returning.

"I want you."

She smiled again, teasing him. "Is this how you seduced women before he wrecked you?"

"Just about. I guess I'm the kind of man a drunk woman wants."

She nodded, seeming to agree. "Pretend this was six months ago. That we just met. You just spotted me and put me in your sights."

He nodded. He left her to wander to the bar and snag two more beers. When he returned he handed her a bottle.

"Thanks, stranger."

He clanked the neck of his beer against hers. "Enjoyin' yourself?"

"I suppose." She took a sip, eyes glued to his.

"I'm Shane Broussard. I own this place. I never seen you here before."

She smiled, game on. "I'm Natalie Foster. I'm just passing through."

"From where to where?"

"Miami to upstate New York."

"That's a long drive." Shane took an equally long pull off his beer. "Not a real direct route either."

She shrugged. "I wanted to see New Orleans."

"Where you stayin' tonight?"

"Motel, I guess. My truck's in the shop. Mechanic's a real dickhead."

"I'll bet." He nodded toward the ceiling. "There's a bed upstairs you're free to use."

She smirked at him, eyes narrowing. "An empty bed?"

"It's empty right now." He moved, standing in front of her and bracing one arm on the wall behind her. He felt his cock growing, straining against the fly of his jeans.

"That's a very tempting offer, Shane Broussard."

He drew closer, so she had to turn her head to take a drink. "I got lots to offer."

She set the bottle down. "Like what?"

He took her hand with his free one and drew it between them, not caring if anyone saw what was happening in their little corner. He cupped her palm over his swollen cock.

She kept her face calm but he saw her eyes turn glassy. "I'm lousy with subtle flirtations, Mr. Broussard. You'll have to spell it out for me." Her fingers tightened around him.

"I'll make you breakfast."

She laughed. "What? Cold cereal?"

He shook his head and pressed himself close. "Eggs. Bacon. Toast and coffee."

"Home fries?"

"I'm out of potatoes."

Natalie slid her hand out from between his legs and turned to drain her beer in two long swallows.

He grabbed the bottle from her and set it down, took hold of both her wrists. He pinned them against the wall above her head, leaned down and kissed her.

It had been months since he'd felt a woman's mouth. Smooth skin, soft lips. He made her feel the opposite—his neglected, stubbly chin. He drank in her beer taste and let his tongue penetrate, let her feel his aggression and dominance, all the promises he wanted to make to her. She was sensual and receptive, following his lead, sweeping her tongue against his to spur him on.

His mouth broke free just as his mind began to swim. "Lemme show you where you'll be sleeping."

She nodded as he released her wrists, her eyes round and half-drunk.

He heard her quiet footsteps following as the music faded and the voices blended to a hum behind them. He felt her energy with him as he mounted the outside porch steps, unlocked the door, flipped on the lights. He grabbed her hand as soon as she stepped inside and pulled her down onto the couch.

Her breasts were soft and full, and she let him fondle them as their mouths came together again. He squeezed her, tweaked her nipples into hard peaks through her tank top. Her hand slid up his thigh and settled between his legs, palm running up and down his pounding cock. Her moan vibrated against his lips.

"Take me out," he said.

She fumbled with his buckle then got his jeans open. He abandoned her breasts to push his shorts down and free his erection. "Touch me."

Her small, smooth hand grazed him, light and appraising. "You're a big man, Shane Broussard."

He clamped his fist over hers, making her strokes tight and rough. He pushed his face against her neck and moaned. "Make me come, darlin'." *Make me forget. Just for a few minutes.*

"Tell me about the first time you were with him," she said. As much as the thought stung, the memory made him high. Made him hard as sin.

"It was right here." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and let her hand take over. "Right on the floor."

"Tell me."

He moaned, remembering. "We'd split a bottle of wine. That's what we always did when he first started inviting himself up. We'd get trashed and end up on the carpet,

kissing and groping each other and watchin' each other jerk off. I let him suck me a few times."

"When did it go further?" Her touch slowed, pure torture.

"I dunno," he sighed. "After a couple weeks of that. We were in here, drinkin', in our underwear. Suddenly he's on his knees on the floor, elbows on the couch cushions, sayin', 'Take me'. I was hammered, and he looked so damn good... I got behind him and pulled his shorts down." Her other hand found his balls, fondling. He groaned, remembering just how he'd felt that night. "He looked so *fucking* good. And he wanted it. I spit on my hand and I fingered him, and he was in goddamn heaven. I never seen anybody get so hot."

"You wanted it too?"

"Fuck yeah, I wanted it. He said, 'Do it, Shane', and I found a rubber from someplace and suddenly I was there. He was beggin' me to. God, he was so fuckin' tight." Her hand gripped him, jogging the memory. "It took awhile, to get in deep, but then I was fuckin' him. And he turned his head and said, 'Pretend you're forcing me'."

Natalie's hand paused. "Take me, Shane."

He stood and got a condom and kicked away his pants and shorts, and Natalie got on her knees, arms on the couch just as he'd described. He knelt behind her and tugged her jeans down. He sheathed himself in the rubber then her. Her moan made his neck hairs stand on end.

It'd been ages since he'd sunk into a woman, and her pussy was wet and deep, slick and hungry for him. He pumped her slow and deliberate. "This what you needed, little girl?"

"Shane..."

He pushed her shirt up and clamped his hands on her waist, liking the softness of her. He kneaded her flesh. "You make me feel real big."

She looked over her shoulder. "You are."



He pushed as deep as he could, until he felt his balls slap her. He pulled out and gave it to her again.

"Tell me how it ended," she said, voice hitching each time his hips bumped her ass.

"I fucked him, like I'm fucking you now." He thrust harder and rougher, mean. "Like that. And he struggled, pretended he didn't want it, but he did. He said my name, over and over, and I felt like the biggest fuckin' man ever to walk the Earth."

She grunted as he slammed into her.

"You say it now," he ordered.

"Shane."

"Again."

She obeyed, moaning his name as he pounded her. He reached around to stroke her clit, as he'd done to Gabriel's cock all those nights ago. He teased her until she was crying out, begging for him.

"Yeah, that's right. Come on my cock, girl."

He felt her pussy tighten and shudder, milking him, and he let go, shooting until he was empty and limp and near to fainting.

He pulled away and she sank down next him, their backs against the couch. He glanced between them. Both panting, both flushed and sweaty and undignified, stripped from the waist down. He decided he didn't give a shit what they looked like. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him, tipping them over into a spent heap on the carpet.

## **Chapter Five**

Natalie awoke to a big hand jostling her shoulder. She squinted her bleary eyes at where Shane stood over the bed. They'd slept there together, or pretended to, both secretly waiting, listening for the sound of the door opening, but it never came.

"You best get up if you want that breakfast," Shane said.

She took the world's fastest shower and dressed, greeted by the smell of bacon as she stepped into the kitchen. Shane was busy at the stove. She sat on a tall stool at the center island, watching his back and arms as he worked.

She smirked at him when he turned, holding a plate of eggs. "You weren't kidding."

He shared a look with her, not quite a smile, but not too far from it. He piled a few strips of bacon and some nearly burned toast beside the eggs and slid a mug of black coffee next to her elbow.

"Well, thank you kindly, Shane Broussard."

"Eat it quick, I got a job to get to."

She dug in.

He loaded himself a plate and leaned on the other side of the counter, eating on his feet. "Your truck's ready," he said between bites. "Has been since yesterday afternoon. You get a lift with me to the shop and go on your merry way."

She nodded. His tone was brusque, but friendly in a no-nonsense way. She knew she'd overstayed her welcome or was about to. "Thanks for all your hospitality."

He shrugged, eyes on his food.

"I have some errands to run in the city," she said. "If I stopped by tonight for a goodbye drink, would I be pushing my luck?"

He met her gaze and she watched him chew and swallow. "Nah. You're welcome here. Downstairs," he amended. "Long as you tip my staff well."

"Will you be around tonight?"

"I'm around most nights," he said noncommittally.

She nodded. She took a gulp of coffee, too hot, too bitter. It burned going down and she rubbed her sternum. "So has this place always been yours?" she asked. "The decorations don't seem like your style."

"Like you know my style, little girl." He smirked at her. "But since you ask, this house was my memaw's. All the decoratin' up here, that's just how she left it. My Aunt Marie inherited it in '02 and made the first floor a bar and did the stuff down there."

"What's with the wedding dresses?"

"My aunt used to own a bridal shop, since before I was born. She said it's a real shame how many dresses get returned, when women get cut loose and need the money when their men up and run out on them. She said it's bad luck to buy a weddin' dress that failed, so she wouldn't resell any of 'em. But she didn't believe in wasting good fabric."

"I see."

"She says this place is haunted by the souls of a hundred jilted brides." He laughed. "She also told me, 'Never marry yourself some poor girl unless you're goddamn sure her dress won't end up in those windows'. So I didn't."

"What's a...whatever this place is called?"

"A shivaree's a big raucous racket the old-timey townsfolk used to make when a couple got hitched. Sort of a weddin' reception crossed with a riot."

"I see. So where's your aunt now?" she asked.

"Got married herself a couple years back. Moved to Texas. Said I was the best barman she'd ever seen and sold me the place for damn near nothing."

"Sounds like she's had better luck than her old customers."

Shane nodded, sopping up yolk with the last bite of his toast. He took their plates to the sink.

"Let's get you back on the road, Miss Natalie."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natalie wandered to the open door of the garage and poked her head around. Shane was standing beside a scrawny teenager, pointing at the underside of a sedan jacked up close to the ceiling. When he turned to leave the kid to whatever instructions he'd imparted, he caught sight of Natalie. He wiped his palms on the rag tucked through his belt loop and walked over.

"Don't you dare come in here and conk yourself on something," he said. "Last thing I need's a lawsuit."

"I want to talk to you about my bill," she said, holding up the yellow copy of the invoice the front desk guy had given her.

"Fees are nonnegotiable," Shane said.

"You didn't charge me anything."

He shrugged. "Lucky you. Must be a clerical error."

"And my wiper blades look suspiciously new. Let me pay you *something*. How much did the plug cost, at least?"

"Never you mind, Miss Natalie."

She gave him a flustered smile. "You do a really good impersonation of an asshole, you know that?"

"My old man set me a real fine example."

"Well, I'm going to swing by tonight, after I go into Baton Rouge." She paused. "If that's still okay with you. My stopping by."

"Free country," he said. "But I know you're only after one last taste of what you can't have."

She pursed her lips then nodded slowly. "Maybe I am." True, she wanted one more confirmation that Gabriel hadn't been a figment. But she wanted more than just that now. She gave Shane a long, casual, up-and-down look.

"Well, then," he said. "I guess I'll be seein' you tonight. You drive safe." He turned away to check on his apprentice.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Shane got back to the Shivaree just past six, he hid a little smile as he spied Natalie perched at the bar. He took a good look at her back and her ass and her dark hair, glad to find those things distracting again. She'd changed her clothes—some kind of stylish short-sleeved blouse and different jeans and shoes. He strode over and set two pizza boxes on the counter beside her.

"You tip my staff like I told you?" he asked.

She smiled her greeting and clinked a tidy, bare nail against the glass jar, pointing out a fifty-dollar bill. "I did my best. That's all I could afford, but I know it's less than you should have charged me for the parts and the tow and the labor."

"True." He caught the bartender's eye and tapped the pizza box. He grabbed a couple singles out of the tip jar and folded them into his wallet. "You're welcome to a slice too," he said to Natalie. "I gotta go get cleaned up. Maybe you'll save me one last sway-to-the-beat, later."

She smiled again, nearly shy, and Shane headed up to shower.

When he came back down twenty minutes later, Gabriel was by the stage, setting up with a couple other guys. Shane took a seat next to Natalie and slid a cold slice from one of the boxes still littering the bar.

"So what night is it?" she asked, nodding toward the stage. He could see that glimmer in her eyes—that hungry, intoxicated look. He didn't glance at Gabriel, not wanting to turn back looking identically glazed and helpless.

"Blues."

She nodded, eyes still trained over his shoulder across the club.

"Truck running okay, then?"

She nodded. "Just like new, thanks." She made an uncertain face then fished around in the purse set before her on the bar. She took out a cell phone, popping off its prepaid packaging and turning it on.

"I don't suppose I could have your number?" she asked. "I've got a long trip ahead of me the next few days. I'd feel better if I had someone to call, if something happens on the road." Her expression and tone were hard to read. There was a flirtation in it somewhere, but some kind of softness too.

Shane took the phone from her and messed around until he figured out how to add a contact and punched in the numbers for the garage and the bar. "There you go. Just don't call me up drunk."

She smiled as she put it back in her purse. "I won't, thanks."

He ordered a beer and a whiskey and nursed them in silence for a little while. Stealing glances to his left every couple minutes, he felt strange toward the woman at his side. Strange and warm and familiar. And grateful.

"So," he said, once the band started up, wanting the music to keep their conversation private. "What'll you do, back north?"

She bit her lip. "Nothing immediately. I'll stay with my mother or my sister for a week or two and figure out my next move. I haven't seen my family in a while. I'm sure they'll be happy to let me stay, since I owe them some major I-told-you-so-ing about my ex. Then when I'm done licking my wounds I'll probably start applying for jobs in the region. The market's so crappy, I think I'll just go wherever the work is. I'm not choosy about the town. Just someplace far from Miami."

"What d'you do?"

She paused a moment then grinned at him. "What do you think I do?" she asked, and tossed her hair.

Shane gave her a long looking-over, trying to guess. Casual, pretty in an approachable way, stylish but not glamorous. "I dunno. Some sort of marketing or advertising or something?"

She shook her head. "I have a nursing degree," she said. "I worked at a hospice in Florida for the last two years. I wouldn't mind doing that again."

He laughed, a small, impressed noise that was drowned out by the music. "Well, that's awful admirable."

She shrugged. "I suppose. But I get aggravated like anybody else. I'm just real good at pretending to be cheerful and patient, even when I want to scream."

"My momma was real good at that," Shane said, and took a deep drink.

"I shouldn't have too much trouble finding a job, compared to some other people," Natalie said. "God knows I could use a change of scenery."

"Gets real snowy up there, right? You're pretty close to Canada?"

She nodded. "Yeah, we get tons of snow because of Lake Ontario."

"I ain't seen snow since New Year's Eve, maybe close to ten years ago," Shane said. "Maybe a hundred flakes fell outta the sky here and you'd have thought it was the Rapture, the way people carried on."

The bartender delivered Natalie's second beer and she smiled. "Well, Shane Broussard, if you ever want to see some real snow, like the kind you can build forts out of, you can come on up to Rochester and find me." Her eyes held his as she took a long drink. "We can go sledding," she added as she set the bottle back down.

He laughed, tapping his fist on the bar. "Don't leave the light on for me, darlin'... Though that's a real pretty invitation." He went quiet, staring at the bottles twinkling behind the register for a couple minutes. He monitored his breathing, making it steady and deep in his chest. When he felt calm enough, he craned his neck to watch the band.

That man... As welcome a distraction as Natalie had become, she could never match the jolt that buzzed through Shane's body when he caught sight of that face.

Gabriel's dark eyes were fixed through the windows opposite the stage. He looked serene, fingers dancing over the strings of the bass, independent of his brain. The brim of his hat cast a shadow over one eye, the other side of his face bathed in red light then blue-green, from the slowly chasing Christmas lights strung above him. Shane wondered where he'd been last night and who with. His heart tightened, a jealous fist gathering and twisting the tendons in his chest. He was used to this. It was a torture he was all-too-familiar with, one he wouldn't wish on anybody as decent as this girl. He stole a glance at her, those eyes glued right where anybody could've guessed they would be.

*He owes her*, Shane thought, and downed his shot. And even though he could argue that he'd warned her that very first night, this was his fault as well. He'd wanted her to suffer this way, to punish her for the way she made Gabriel look at her. Shane owed her too.

They both owed her one goddamn unforgettable night.

\* \* \* \* \*

An energetic song wrapped. Natalie stepped back a pace on the dance floor from Shane's warm, strong body to clap for the band, careful to keep her eyes off the stage. They waited a few seconds for the next number to start, but instead the rumbling bass of the singer's voice thanked the crowd and announced they'd be taking a ten-minute break. No canned music came on to replace them, and the silence was filled by a few dozen spirited conversations and the tinkle of glasses. Natalie looked up at Shane.

"Guess our dance is over," she said, but his attention was focused somewhere past her shoulder. She turned as Gabriel strolled across the floor to meet them. That predictable feeling quickened her pulse, tightened her throat.

"Evenin'," he said, black eyes moving between their faces.

Shane nodded as Natalie said, "Nice set."



"How's your truck?" Gabriel asked. Such simple, innocuous words...yet they may as well have been whispered against her pussy, for the shiver that traced her spine.

"It's ready for a road trip," she said, smiling at him. "I'm heading back north tomorrow morning."

He nodded, the gesture lazy and indifferent.

"I need to talk to you," Shane said suddenly, looking square at him, man to man.

Gabriel nodded again and they excused themselves, disappearing through a door beside the bar, into what Natalie suspected must be an office or a break room. She wandered back to the table where they'd left their half-drunk beers and drained hers. The men reappeared quicker than she'd expected. Shane walked to her and Gabriel headed back to the stage as the band reassembled.

She licked her lips, uncertain. She searched Shane's face, not seeing any of that glassy expression he usually wore after having a private exchange with Gabriel.

"You boys been talking about me?" she asked, playing coy, feeling nervous.

He nodded and looked at the bottles, finding his. He swallowed its dregs before he said, "I told him we owe you a proper goodbye."

Her lips twitched. "Oh yeah? What exactly does that mean?"

"You come upstairs after last call and you tell us."

She wished another drink would appear in her hand to give her something to do with her mouth while she chose a reply. Instead she gulped air. "I'll be honest with you, Shane... It sounds like you're offering to be nice to me. I hope it won't sound too rude if I ask you why."

He kept his eyes on the band as he thought. They launched into a harmonica-heavy number.

Shane finally spoke, bringing his mouth close to her ear. "He owes you for how you'll feel when you leave here. All that withdrawal. And I owe you for lettin' you get close enough to him to have to go through that."

She pulled her face back and held his eyes. "You think I'll regret all this?"

He nodded.

She tried to look amused and cool to cover up the fact that he didn't know the half of it. "This was just a two-man rebound, Shane. Probably the best rebound a girl could ask for. I'll be fine. In fact, I'll mail you a thank-you card as soon as I'm home."

He swallowed, expression solemn and a bit drunk, eyes back on the stage. She joined him, watching Gabriel and welcoming his spell.

"You just think about what you want tonight," Shane said.

She smirked to herself, unseen. She didn't have to think about it for a second.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the lights came up just after two o'clock, Natalie shook herself out of a dreamy haze. Shane had gone to help man the bar a couple hours earlier, letting one of his staff head home early. Natalie was seated across the wood from him, picking the label off her empty bottle.

Shane caught her and frowned at the mess, then leaned in, blowing all the little flecks of paper off the bar and into her lap. He ran a wet rag over the wood and grinned at her. "There's all that snow you been talkin' about."

She watched him close the club down. Or half-watched. She also half-watched Gabriel, putting his bass away and bidding the other musicians good night.

Twenty minutes later the last of the patrons and staff disappeared through the front porch and Shane locked up behind them. He and Gabriel moved toward Natalie at the same time from opposite directions, making her feel like a deer trapped between two wolves.

Gabriel reached where she was sitting first. He took hold of her leg and uncrossed it from the other. He stepped between her thighs and stroked his hands over her jaw and cheeks. He leaned in to nip at her lips with his teeth. If there'd been any breath left in

her lungs, it would've been sucked clean out as Shane's hands snaked around from behind to cup her breasts.

He whispered into the hair above her ear as Gabriel deepened his kiss. "You know what you want from us?" His fingers coaxed her nipples into stiff peaks and stroked them, heating her chest and neck.

She spoke against Gabriel's mouth. "Yeah, I know." Gabriel stood up straight, hips pressing close, his erection hard against her thigh. She grazed her palms over his sides and he touched her face.

"Upstairs?" Shane asked. She felt him now too – his cock against her lower back.

"Yeah," she said, and swallowed. "Upstairs is good." In Shane's bed, she thought. Those smells and aggressive sounds, two hard bodies against her soft one. So fucking right. Pity she couldn't mail a video of it to her shithead ex-boyfriend.

Shane led the way, through the side porch and up those familiar steps. She listened to the key sliding into the lock, the knob being turned, the light switch flipping – tiny, torturous triggers, making the anticipation in her cunt flare as they entered the apartment.

"In your bed," she said to Shane, and he led the way.

She kicked her flats off beside the couch and sat on the edge of the mattress, watching the men unlace their shoes.

Shane finished first, and as he approached she caught his expression darken, predatory. She felt her eagerness falter, daunted all over again by his height, his size, that look in his eye. He pushed her down onto the bed, bracing himself above her. Her fear transformed when he kissed her. As his tongue penetrated, she slid her hands beneath his shirt and raked his back with her nails. She needed to touch him again – to feel the brutality of his desire, the impolite roughness of it, so different from the smooth seductions promised by his lover. Shane pushed his hips between her thighs and leaned back, tugging her by the waist of her jeans until their centers touched.

"Take your shirt off," she said.

He surprised her by obeying. Pearl snaps ran up the front of his checked western shirt, and he ripped it open in one motion. His hips pumped as he slid it from his shoulders, his erection rubbing her, the two layers of denim feeling like a punishment. She watched his triceps flex as he peeled his undershirt up from his waist to show her every square inch of his broad chest and tight stomach. His belly swelled and contracted with rapid breaths. To the right, still standing by the couch, Gabriel had his dark eyes fixed on them.

"I want him to watch," she whispered to Shane.

He nodded. He let her sit up enough to get her top off, to reach behind and unclasp her bra. Shane's mouth and hands found her breasts as she lay back down. She ran her hands over the soft bristle of his buzzed hair while he suckled and plucked, coaxing that hot, impatient buzz into her chest, down her arms, right to her fingertips. He teased her until the longing turned to demand. She shoved at his shoulders and he leaned back again, showing her those long, tight muscles. His face looked flushed in the dim glow of the lamp beside the couch. The light cast Gabriel as a near-silhouette, making him seem dangerous.

"Fuck me, Shane," she said, loud enough for both men to hear. "Just like you did last night."

He nodded, eyes half-lidded. "Turn over then."

She moved to her hands and knees, feeling Shane's big fingers at her fly. After he eased her jeans and panties down to her knees she heard his buckle release, his zipper lower. She looked to Gabriel. He watched them with his parted lips, as distracted as she'd ever seen him.

"Come closer," she told him as Shane leaned over her for a condom.

Gabriel crossed the room slowly, slow as Shane's fingers penetrating her lips. She moaned, from one's man touch, the other's mere proximity.

Shane clamped a hand to her waist, setting a rhythm as he fucked her with his hand. "Get your clothes off," he said to Gabriel.

Natalie watched him undress. His hat, each button of his shirt, his belt, his pants.

"Stop there," Shane said, and Gabriel stood in his boxer briefs. To Natalie he said, "Tell me what you need."

"You know what I need," she countered. She pushed into each thrust of his fingers. "I need to get fucked, Shane."

"You want my cock, darlin'?"

She twisted her body to look back at him. His hard-on was already sheathed, hovering just above her ass. "Just like last night," she said. "And more."

His fingers left her as he angled himself to her pussy. He pushed in a couple inches, so goddamn thick. She moaned. He pulled out then drove deeper.

"What's 'more'?" Shane asked, setting his pace, slow and steady.

"Faster, for starters," she said.

He obeyed, hands on her hips, thrusts quick and smooth. She turned to Gabriel. His cock was hard, curving up to one side and tenting his shorts. He stroked it lightly, two fingers running up and down its length, his eyes glued between Natalie's and Shane's bodies.

Shane fucked her harder and deeper and rougher, some show to make Gabriel jealous. Jealous of which one of them, Natalie wasn't sure, but it seemed to work. She could see his excitement and agitation in the flex of his diaphragm as he breathed and the tension in his face.

"Harder, Shane," she said.

"You like the way I fuck, don't you?"

"I love it. I love your cock," she said. "And how full you make me feel."

He pumped hard. "I'm gonna make you come on me, just like last night," he promised.

"I'm sure you will," she said, glancing back at him. "But I'm not in any rush."

Beside them, Gabriel stroked himself harder, his fist hidden behind his underwear. He looked mean and hungry but not half as hungry as Natalie felt.

"It's Gabriel's turn," she said to Shane, eyes jumping between them.

Shane released her after a few more thrusts and she turned over, kicking her pants off, relaxing against the comforter and pillows. Gabriel climbed onto the bed as Shane moved aside. He spread his knees between hers, lowering down to rub his hard cock against her wet pussy, drenching his shorts.

"Get him ready, Shane," she said. "Tell him what I like."

Shane found another condom and knelt behind Gabriel. She watched him push his underwear down and looked between them at Shane's big hand stroking Gabriel's dick.

"Is he hard?" she asked Shane.

"Oh yeah. He wants it, darlin'." He stroked him faster, and she could see the droplet of pre-come beading at Gabriel's slit.

"Let him have it then."

Shane ripped the plastic open and rolled the condom down Gabriel's cock.

"Fuck her," he commanded.

She held Gabriel's hips as he closed the space between them. He slid in, smooth, pushing deep and holding for a few breaths, savoring.

"Fuck her," Shane barked.

Gabriel complied. His thrusts came fluid and steady, tensing the muscles of his chest and shoulders and arms in the low light, the most gorgeous spectacle Natalie had ever seen. The illusion of his calm was wrecked by the low moans rising from his throat, desperate little noises that made her feel powerful. She fingered her clit as he fucked her, drinking in every square inch of his bare flesh.

"Nice and fast," Shane said.

Gabriel obeyed. His lids looked heavy, lips swollen. He turned to where Shane knelt at their sides. "Fuck me," he begged.

"It's not about you tonight," Shane said, stony. "It's about her."

Gabriel looked back to her but addressed Shane. "What's she want then?"

"Good question," Shane said. "What d'you say, Miss Natalie?"

She glanced between them. She reveled in Gabriel's cock as it slid into her, steady and deep.

"I want both of you," she said.

Shane watched for a few beats longer before he spoke. "That's what you're gettin'."

"At the same time."

She caught his eyebrow twitch. "Front and back?"

She shook her head. "Not my scene."

"How, then?"

"In my pussy. Both of you."

The men exchanged a telling look, and Gabriel pulled out and moved to the side. In seconds, Shane was between her legs, cock driving deep. He pulled almost all the way out then pushed in fast and harsh. "Both of us... You think you can handle that?"

"I don't know. But you better get me real wet if we're going to find out."

"Selfish," he said, his grin wicked.

"Have you ever done it?" she asked. "I haven't. I'm not actually sure how it works."

"No," Shane said. "But I seen plenty of porn. I'm sure we can figure it out." He fucked her hard for a few moments then paused again. "Who d'you want to be facing?"

She thought a moment or pretended to. "Him."

Shane nodded and withdrew. He turned to Gabriel. "Get on your back."

Gabriel lay down. Shane reached for the lube, kneeling between Gabriel's legs and stroking him, making him slick. He prepped himself next then turned to do Natalie, wet fingers slow and gentle.

He snapped the bottle closed. "Straddle him."

She swung a leg over Gabriel's hips and felt him sink in, deep and easy. She rode him, luxuriating. Then she felt the mattress sink as Shane got in position behind her, grasping her waist. She held her breath.

"Relax, darlin'." His voice was dark but kind. "And lean forward as much as you can. I'll go real slow."

Natalie slid her arms under Gabriel's back, settling her chest against his. His skin, like his cock, was slick and hot.

"Tilt your hips a little. I'm gonna start," Shane said. One hand left her side and she felt his head at her lips, pressing.

"Yeah," Gabriel breathed. His hands kneaded her back, and she felt his body twitching, aching for this. "More."

"I'm not yours to command tonight," Shane told him, cocky. "What d'you say, girl?"

"Go ahead," she said. "Try a little deeper."

Shane made a hissing noise, and Natalie caught her breath as he pushed, his head sliding in, spreading her open.

"Oh God."

Shane paused. "It hurt?"

"Not in a bad way."

She felt his hands roam her back and waist, giving her a reprieve before he pushed deeper.

Right by her ear, Gabriel moaned.

"You're so tight," Shane whispered. He withdrew, slow, and reached for the lube bottle again. "You tell me if it's too much."

She squeezed Gabriel harder in her arms as Shane returned, sliding in as deep as before.

"Fuck," he said.



"I want you how you are, Shane. Once you're in, don't be gentle."

He drove deeper, feeling like some beautiful, perfect violation.

"More," she begged.

She could hear him, his short breaths and tiny grunts as he took her, inch by thick inch. Gabriel's hands snaked into her hair and he whimpered.

"You feel amazing. Both of you," she said. She wished she could see Shane. She wished there was a mirror, so she could watch all this happening to her.

"Ready to get fucked?" Shane asked, that familiar, mean tone returning to his voice, thrilling her.

"I'm ready."

"You move first. Show us the speed."

She pushed up to her elbows. She drew her hips forward an inch then pushed back, taking both their cocks as deep as she could. A deep moan rose from her chest, and she thought she might die from the sensation, from all that power pulsing inside her.

"That's right," Shane said. "Be greedy."

She led for a few more thrusts then Shane's hands clamped her waist, holding her still. He slid out a few inches, then back, hard. She gasped.

"Good girl." He set a slow rhythm, the bump of his hips steady and controlled. Gabriel began to move too, first matching the beat, then alternating his thrusts with Shane's.

She lowered her forehead to his chest, reveling.

"Oh you love that," Shane said. She gasped as his hand came down on her ass.

"Yeah."

His hips pumped harder. "You like gettin' fucked by two guys, don't you?"

"I love it."

Gabriel moaned, writhing beneath her. "She's so tight."

"Yeah," Shane said. "We're gonna make you come, little girl."

She grasped Gabriel's shoulders, digging her nails into him. "How does he feel?" she whispered.

"So hard."

"I'm fucking you next," Shane warned, thrusting fast.

Natalie felt her hold on reality slipping. Two big, hot male bodies pounded her, chaotic and rough. Her clit stroked Gabriel's pubic bone with every thrust of Shane's cock, each motion like the strike of a flint, sparking, bringing her closer.

"I think she's gonna come," Shane said, cruel and taunting.

"Oh God."

"Come on," he said. "Come on."

"Come," Gabriel whispered, and the rasp of his voice in her ear pushed her into free-fall.

Her body clenched, wanting to possess theirs, wanting to stop them, before the pleasure split her in two. They both pushed in deep and held there as she rode out the spasms.

As reality returned, she heard herself first, a low, luxurious moan, then them, heavy breathing, deep sighs. Their skin was slippery, Gabriel's chest and stomach against hers, Shane's hips against her ass. After a few exquisite moments, Shane withdrew. Natalie felt empty but unspeakably satisfied. Shane's hands ran over her, from her shoulders to her thighs.

"Good girl."

She pushed herself up on trembling arms and flopped over beside Gabriel. "Holy shit," she said, and laughed.

Shane smirked at her then his attention shifted. He knelt between Gabriel's spread legs and stripped both their condoms off.

"You feelin' taken care of, Miss Natalie?" Shane asked, reaching for a fresh rubber and cocking an eyebrow at her.

"I feel broken, thank you."

He nodded and got himself re-equipped. Gabriel watched, hungry as always. He tried to turn over but Shane pinned his hips. They exchanged a brief, tense look then Shane slid a hand beneath each of Gabriel's knees and pushed them up, spreading him open.

"Get yourself ready," Shane said.

Gabriel grabbed the lube bottle, prepping himself then Shane. Shane entered him, balls-deep in a handful of thrusts. They both moaned, and Shane leaned forward, locking his shoulders against the backs of Gabriel's knees.

Natalie wrapped the covers around herself, just watching. She could sense something about this was different for them. The darting of Gabriel's eyes told her they'd never fucked this way, face-to-face, that this was something Shane hadn't allowed before tonight.

Shane's words came out thick and drunk as his body worked. "Lemme watch you shoot."

Gabriel reached a hand down to jerk himself, Shane's eyes taking in every movement.

"Good. That's good. Take my cock, boy."

Gabriel's face was flushed and Natalie could see the fingers of his other hand shaking against Shane's ribs. He started to gasp—frightened, disbelieving sounds.

"Good boy. Come on. Lemme see."

"Shane."

"That's right."

Gabriel said the name, over and over. His fist pumped fast and rough, mimicking Shane's thrusts until he gave in. The come lashed his clenched stomach, and Shane

joined him. His back arched and his hips froze, pushing deep, and his groans filled the room, punctuating each spasm. For a few seconds, the men were still, chests rising and falling violently. Natalie caught their eyes lock, sharing some intimate message she'd never dare try to understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mattress bucked as Shane left the bed, rousing Natalie. Early morning. She kept her eyes shut and listened to his steps grow faint then the hiss of the shower behind the bathroom door. For reasons she felt but couldn't articulate, she knew she had to leave before he got back. She wasn't supposed to say goodbye to Shane.

She opened her eyes to study Gabriel, still stretched out next to her, eyes half-open like a contented cat.

Gabriel. She ran a hand over his tan skin, over the dozens or hundreds of black and blue staves tattooed across his chest and shoulders and arms. His dark eyes followed hers.

"That's Shane's, right there," he said in a sleep-sticky voice, putting his fingertips to the staff tracing his collarbone.

Natalie felt her brows rise as she looked at all those ribbons of notes. One tune for every lover? For every person he considered meaningful? Every person he'd ever hurt?

"What music is it?" she asked.

Gabriel closed his eyes, drawing his finger along Shane's notes and humming a bar of *Summertime*, the Gershwin standard. His eyes opened again and he smiled. "What will yours be?" he asked.

"My what?"

"Your music, when I add it. And where?" He sat up and touched a few ink-free spaces, prime real estate.

Natalie thought a moment. There was a sting that came from knowing she'd be one tiny scrawl among many. But there was a thrill of pride too, from the intention and the permanence of the invitation. Some small guarantee against being forgotten.

She got to her knees and ran her fingers over a bare spot just under his shoulder. "Here," she said, and sat back down.

"What song?"

"I'll let you pick," she said. "Maybe you could write something special for the occasion." Frankly, she didn't want to know what it would be. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life doomed to mourn this man's absence each time she heard the notes. "Don't tell me."

Gabriel grinned, nodding slowly. "All right then."

"I better go," she said.

They both got up, and as Natalie dressed she looked around Shane's bedroom one last time. She tried to memorize the smell of it, and the way the light came through the tall windows...though she knew that in just a few weeks, she wouldn't even remember how many windows there were, or whether his sheets were gray or blue. She thought about writing her new number down and leaving it for Shane, but she knew he wouldn't use it any more than she'd use the ones he'd put in her phone.

Gabriel tugged his pants on and walked her to the front door. He framed himself in the threshold as she stepped onto the landing, into the cool, damp morning air. She turned to smile at him, one last taste of that face and body, those deadly eyes, that criminal's smile. She wondered if he'd ever let Shane go free.

"Thanks for everything," she said. "And thank him too."

Gabriel nodded. His expression changed as a thought distracted him. He stepped back inside for a moment and returned with his hat, setting it on her head.

Natalie took it off and studied it a moment, admiring the worn felt as she turned the brim in her hands. "Thanks," she said and gave it back. "But no."

His smile was tight as he nodded. "You have a safe trip now."

She looked at her feet for a few moments then back up at that face. "You treat him good."

She watched his lips part, and then she turned and left him behind.

## About the Author

Cara McKenna writes smart erotica: a little dark, a little funny, definitely sexy and always emotional. She lives north of Boston with her extremely good-natured and permissive husband. When she's not trapped inside her own head, Cara can usually be found in the kitchen, the coffee shop or the nearest duck-filled pond.

Cara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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